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A Hall of Fame Classic

By DR. EDWARD
E. SMITH



A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

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The City at **WORLD'S END**

An Amazing Novel
By EDMOND HAMILTON

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AT ITS BEST

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JULY 1955



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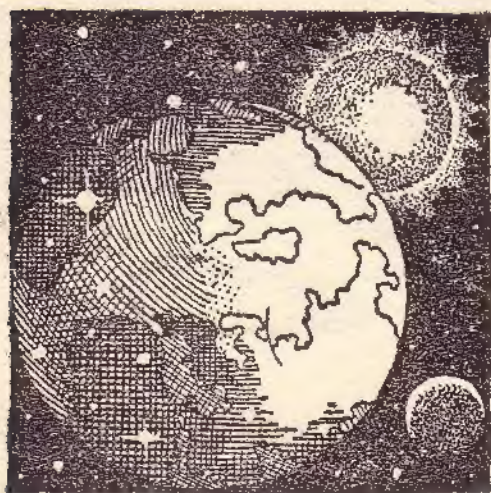
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STARTLING STORIES

Vol. 21, No. 3

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

July, 1950



A Complete Novel

THE CITY AT WORLD'S END

By EDMOND HAMILTON

At first the people of Middletown thought that the superbomb was only a dud—but actually it hurled all their town forward a million years! 11

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AN intriguing aspect of science fiction and the entire field of fantasy, which has come increasingly to our attention of late, is its virtual invulnerability to any form of government censorship. As long as the author rids himself of the limitations of reality he can say virtually anything about his hypothetical anybodies and there is no one who can say him nay.

In an age which, throughout far too much of the world, seems to be tending more and more toward restriction from above of human thought and theory, this freedom in fantasy may make science fiction of increasing social and political importance in the years ahead. We hope no need for such evasion becomes general in this country, heaven knows, but in view of the world threat we are grateful for the existence and growing popularity of stf.

A Work of Fantasy

It is by no means a coincidence that the most widely read current protest against this ingrowth of human liberty yet written should be a work of future fantasy that fits virtually all the many rules and regulations created about science fiction. And at times these rules and regulations are more annoying than the local canasta restrictions wherever met.

The work we refer to, of course, is "1984," by the late George Orwell, whose rise last year to almost immediate best-sellerhood speaks volumes for the good sense and inherent stubborn devotion to freedom of thought and speech and writing of the English speaking peoples.

Actually there is nothing new in use of fantasy to evade rigorous political or social censorship. It is, in fact, man's oldest device, threading back to virtually all ancient peoples of any written culture at all. Jonathan Swift certainly used it in the voyages of Lemuel Gulliver to Lilliput,

Brodingnag, Blufescu and the land of the Houyhnhnms, in each of which he assailed some facet of the contemporary scene with the razor's edge of satiric fantasy.

Many of the older fairy tales originally had implications which were definitely not for children, dragons, ogres, gnomes and the like being frequently interchangeable with tyrants or other unpopular political figures. And while Mother Goose may seem a far cry from stf, its implications were once heavy with slimly hidden satire.

The Foe of Regimentation

Fantasy and, of course, science fiction will ever remain the despair of those who seek to regiment society no matter how noble or corrupt their purpose. In this modern age it is impossible to maintain a working, functioning population, agricultural, industrial or both, without teaching the people to read.

And once people have been taught to read they become vulnerable, not only to the propaganda inflicted upon them by their rulers but to all sorts of propaganda calculated to show their rulers up as something less than divine.

When such anti-government propaganda takes the form of factual reporting it can be and usually is ruthlessly stamped out in any enduring totalitarian regime. But when it is written as fantasy the official censors are up a tree.

If they do not suppress it they are admitting the enemy to their collective and collectivist bosom. But if they do they are virtually admitting themselves guilty of the sins of the fantasy author's supposedly imaginary creations. Which is something no competent public relations boss would have happen.

So science fiction, like the rest of fantasy of which immense literary field it is so vital at present, seems likely to remain free no

matter what happens. And it will, despite its all-too-prevalent current dependence upon dictatorship plots, remain the pledged and bitter foe of all authoritarianism. For its very creation demands freedom from conventional shackles of thought.

SEMI-ANNUAL SCIENCE FICTION FAN CLUB LISTINGS

AFTER the dismal showing in TWS of last December, when we threatened to eliminate entirely this service to organizers of science fiction fan groups, things have picked up considerably all around. A very respectable number of aficionados wrote in with information about their clubs and we gladly reprint it as follows—

THE ASTRO BIO-CHEMS SCIENCE & SCIENCE FICTION CLUB—

write Secretary-Treasurer Morton D. Paley, 1455 Townsend Avenue, New York 53, New York.

The BUFFALO FANTASY LEAGUE—

write Secretary Roger G. Knuth, 37 Kenwood Road, Kenwood, New York, or Claude Held, 307 East Utica Street, Buffalo, New York.

The CENTAURIANS—

write President Phil Gordon Waggoner, 2316 1/2 Charleston Avenue, Mattoon, Illinois.

The EUGENE SCIENCE FANTASY SOCIETY—

write President Rosco E. Wright, 146 East 12th Avenue, Eugene, Oregon.

The FANTASY ARTISANS CLUB—

write President Ken Brown, Box No. 105, Los Alamos, California, or Secretary-Treasurer Franklin M. Dietz, Jr., P.O. Box No. 696, Kings Park, Long Island, New York.

The FUTURIAN SCIENTIFIC ASSOCIATION—

write Secretary Susan Bradney, Hotel Aberdeen, 17-19-21 West 32nd Street, New York 1, New York.

The INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE FICTION CORRESPONDENCE CLUB—

write President Lawrence Kiehlbauch, Route 2, No. 223, Billings, Montana.

The LOS ANGELES SCIENCE FANTASY SOCIETY—

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The MONTREAL SCIENCE FICTION SOCIETY—

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The NAMELESS ONES—

write Mrs. G. M. Carr, 3200 Harvard North, Seattle, Washington.

The NATIONAL FANTASY FAN FEDERATION—

write Roy Lavender, Box No. 132, Delaware, Ohio.

The OUTLANDER SOCIETY—

write Rick Sneary, 2962 Santa Ana Street, South Gate, California.

The SCIFANS—

write Mr. S. Serxner, 1308 Hoe Avenue, Bronx 59, New York.

The UNIVERSAL MUSKETEERS—

write Ronald Friedman, 1980 East 8th Street, Brooklyn 23, New York.

The WASHINGTON SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION—

write Richard Eney, RFD No. 1, Box No. 2398, Alexandria, Virginia.

The WASHINGTON STATE FANTASY FEDERATION—

write William N. Austin, Wolf Den Book Shop, 724 Pike Street, Seattle 1, Washington.

YOUNG FANDOM—

write Arnice Gurley, Oswego, Illinois.

As we said in our introduction the above list is an improvement over the last we ran. Also present is C. Ray Bryan, 305 North 2nd Street, Buckroe Beach, Virginia, who was, when last heard from, seeking to
[Turn page]



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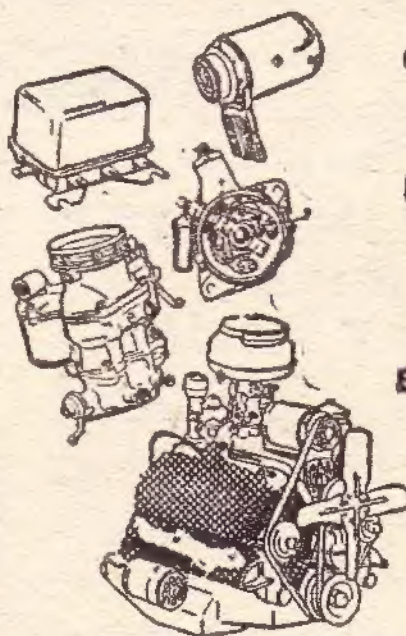
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organize a group of fans in the Newport News, Hampton and Phoebus areas of the Virginia peninsula. We wish him luck.

However, those who wrote in are, alas, but a few of many, and we hope that the next listing we run will be a lot larger and more representative. Get your club listing in and get it in now!

OUR NEXT ISSUE

FOR September Raymond F. Jones, whose work has been growing of increasing importance in both this magazine and its companion, THRILLING WONDER STORIES, of recent months, steps up with his first full novel-length swing in a magnificent pseudo-science story entitled THE CYBERNETIC BRAINS.

It is, of course, fact that cybernetics, otherwise the development of machines that substitute for human thinking processes and, in many cases, improve upon them, are a growing factor not only in science but in all human development at present. Already commonplace in important laboratories and research centers are "thinking" machines that can, in a matter of minutes, solve mathematical and other problems that take the most highly trained living mathematicians weeks, months or even years.

Such machines are able to retain indefinitely on tap—as long as there is sufficient electric current to keep them running—whatever facts are fed into them without limit or error. Hence their aid to scientific memory is invaluable. But no one has yet created a "brain" capable of imaginative or creative thought save the Creator Himself.

Mr. Jones takes a long and penetrating look in his novel at a not far distant and all too possible future in which this apparently unsolvable problem has to all appearances and results been solved. He foresees an era in which cybernetics have come of age.

The "brains" are responsible for virtually all of the machinery that enables humanity to progress—from virtually all labor and craftsmanship and production to the creation of food itself. No one doubts their usefulness or ability to think for themselves—except one young scientist who stumbles on a dreadful truth.

The so-called "mechanical" brains are actually run by human brains, removed from human bodies and carefully hidden in

the hearts of the great machines, where they are condemned to what amounts to eternal slavery and anguish—without even the release of death itself to give them rest.

Not long after this scientist rebels at this abuse of human rights and freedom he and his wife are slain in a contrived automobile accident and find themselves confined—or their still-living brains, rather—in the machines against whose use he has protested.

From then on begins one of the most terrible and suspenseful and remorseless struggles ever conceived and written in science fiction—with an ultimate victory for neither the brains or those responsible for their confinement. This is a new and different type of science fiction story which should do much to make our September issue memorable. It is, like all Jones stories, a stirring human and emotional tale as well as an ingenious and imaginative work of pseudo science. Look forward to it.

Captain Future will be back again in novelet form in **THE HARPERS OF TITAN** by Edmond Hamilton, in which Curt Newton and all the Futurefolk travel to the huge moon to save the Solar System from a menace which only Simon Wright, the Brain, can check. For it involves a neuro-hypnotic stasis that flesh and blood is utterly unable to withstand.

(Continued on page 144)

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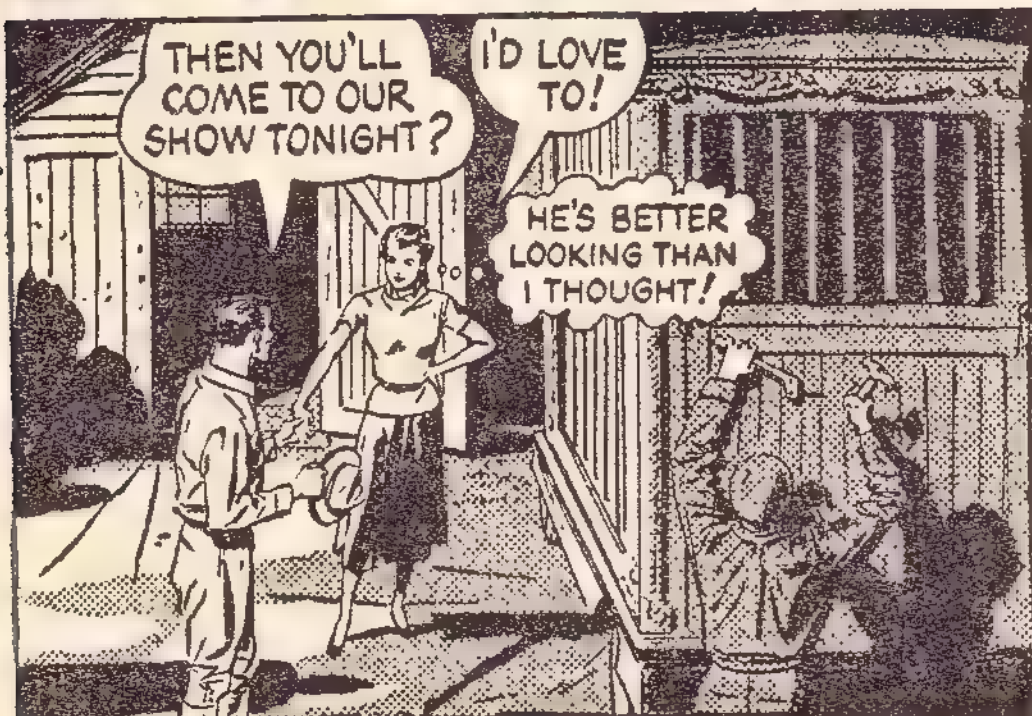
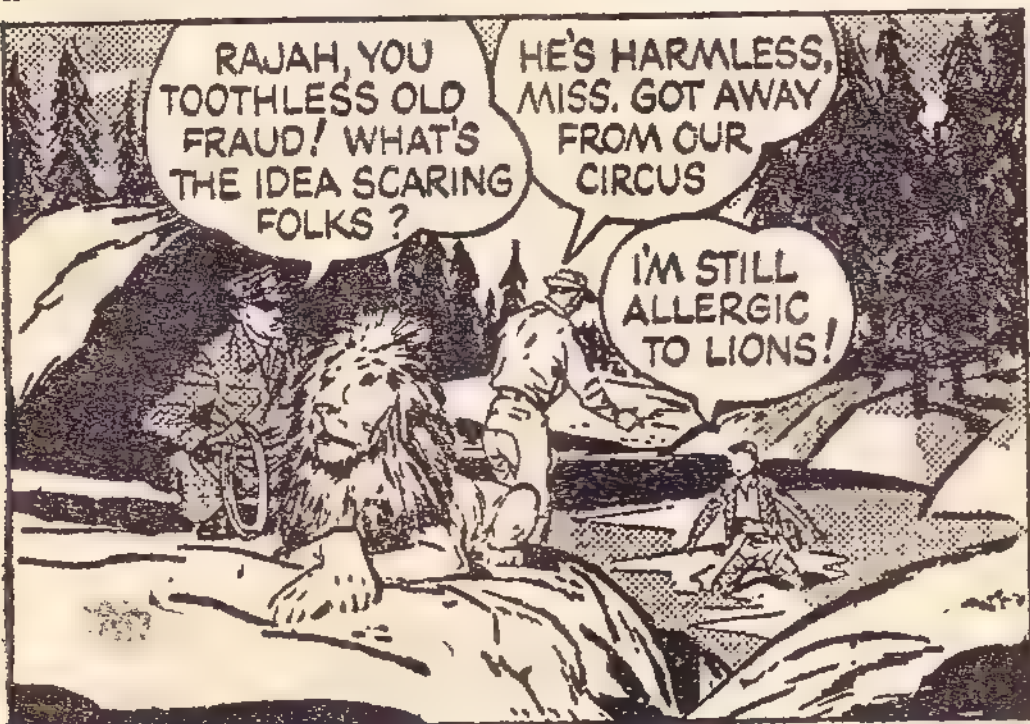


ON AN OVERNIGHT HOP TO THE NEXT TOWN, YOUNG JERRY HUNTER'S SMALL TRAVELING CIRCUS SUDDENLY LOSES ONE OF ITS MAJOR ATTRACTIONS...



AN EVENING

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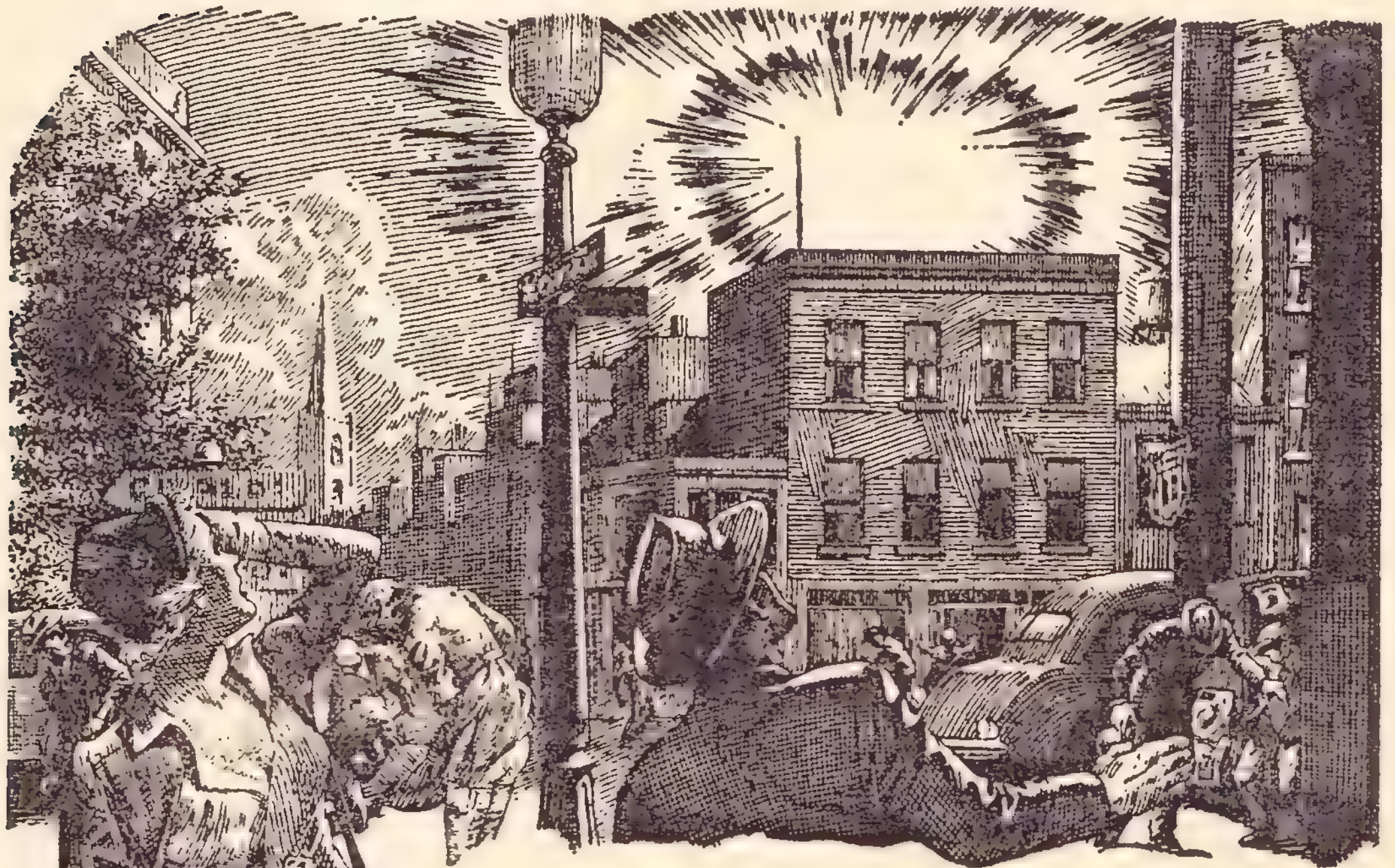
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THE CITY *at World's End*

CHAPTER I

Flung Through

KENNISTON realized afterward that it was like death. You knew you were going to die some day but you didn't believe it. He had known there was danger of the long-dreaded atomic war beginning with a sneak punch but he hadn't really believed it.

Not until that June morning when the missile came down on Middletown. And then there was no time for realization. You don't

The World Was an Abandoned Derelict of Space

hear or see a thing that comes at five miles a second.

The sky split wide open as a new and awful sun suddenly blazed above the town. In that fraction of a second Kenniston knew that the surprise attack had come and that the first of the long-feared super-atomic bombs had exploded overhead. . . .

Shock, thought Kenniston, as his mouth crushed the grimy sidewalk—the shock that keeps a dying man from feeling pain.

That first eye-blinding flare across the heavens, that first staggering quake that had pitched him off his feet, had been all he had felt—until now.

"It's begun," he thought dazedly. "And Middletown has been hit by the first super-atomic."

He ought to be dead and he thought it very probable that he was dying right now but that didn't prevent Kenniston from scrambling shakily to his feet.

He looked down Mill Street. He expected to see pulverized buildings, smoking craters, fire and steam and destruction. But what he saw was more stunning, and in a strange way, more awful.

He saw Middletown lying unchanged and peaceful in the sunlight!

The policeman on the next corner was still standing there, looking open-mouthed around him. The shawled old woman who had been approaching was still there too, though now she was dazedly clutching a wall.

Cars and street-cars were still moving along the street in the distance, though some of them were now jerking to a halt.

The policeman came up to Kenniston. He looked like a young efficient officer—or he would have if his mouth hadn't sagged so loosely and his eyes had not been so stunned.

He asked hoarsely, "What happened?"

Kenniston answered. "A surprise attack by a missile from God knows where.

We've been hit by a bomb—a super-atomic."

The policeman looked at him. "Are you crazy?"

"Yes," said Kenniston. "I think maybe I am. I think that's the only explanation."

HIS brain had begun to pound. The air felt suddenly cold and strange and the sunshine was duskier and redder and didn't warm him now.

The old woman in the shawl was crying.

"Look," said the policeman, "I've read stuff about those super-atomic bombs in the papers. It said they were thousands of times more powerful than the atom-bombs they used in the last war. If one of them hit any place there wouldn't be anything left of it."

His voice was getting stronger. He was convincing himself. "So no super-atomic bomb could have hit us. It *couldn't* have been that."

"You saw that terrific flash in the sky, didn't you?" said Kenniston.

"Sure I did but—" And then the policeman's face cleared. "Say, it was a fizzle. That's what it was. This super-atomic bomb they've been scaring the world with—it turned out to be just a fizzle."

He laughed noisily in vast relief. "Isn't that rich? They tell for years what terrible things it's going to do and then it just makes a big fizz and flash like a bad Fourth-of-July firecracker!"

It could be true, Kenniston thought, with a wild surge of hope. It could be true. And then he looked up and saw the Sun.

"It was maybe a bluff all the time." The policeman's voice rattled on. "They maybe didn't have any super-atomic bomb at all."

Kenniston, without lowering his gaze, spoke in a dry whisper. "They had them all right. And they used one on us. And I think we're dead and don't know it

but Those Who Lived There Would Not Desert It!

yet. We don't know yet that we're only ghosts and not living on Earth any more."

"Not on Earth?" said the policeman angrily. "Now listen—"

And then his voice trailed away to silence as he followed Kenniston's staring gaze and looked up at the Sun.

It wasn't the Sun—not the Sun they and all the generations of men had known as a golden dazzling orb.

They could look right at this Sun without blinking. They could stare at it steadily, for it was no more than a very big dull-glowing red ball with flames

Street. He had been on his way to the Lab when this happened. He kept on going now. He wanted to hear what Hubble and the others would say about this.

He laughed a little. "I am a ghost, going to talk with other ghosts about our sudden deaths."

Then he said to himself fiercely, "Stop that! You're a scientist. What good is your science if it cracks up in the face of an unexplained phenomenon?"

That, certainly, was an understatement. A super-atomic bomb went off over a quiet little Midwestern town of fifty thousand people—and it didn't



writhing around its edges. It was higher in the sky now than it had been before. And the air was cold.

"It's in the wrong place," said the policeman. "And it looks different."

He groped in half-forgotten high-school science for an explanation. "Refraction. Dust that that fizzle-bomb stirred up—"

Kenniston didn't tell him. What was the use? What was the good of telling him what he as a scientist knew—that no conceivable refraction could give the Sun a visible corona such as he was staring at now.

So he said, "Maybe you're right."

"Sure I'm right," said the policeman loudly. He didn't look up at the sky and the Sun any more.

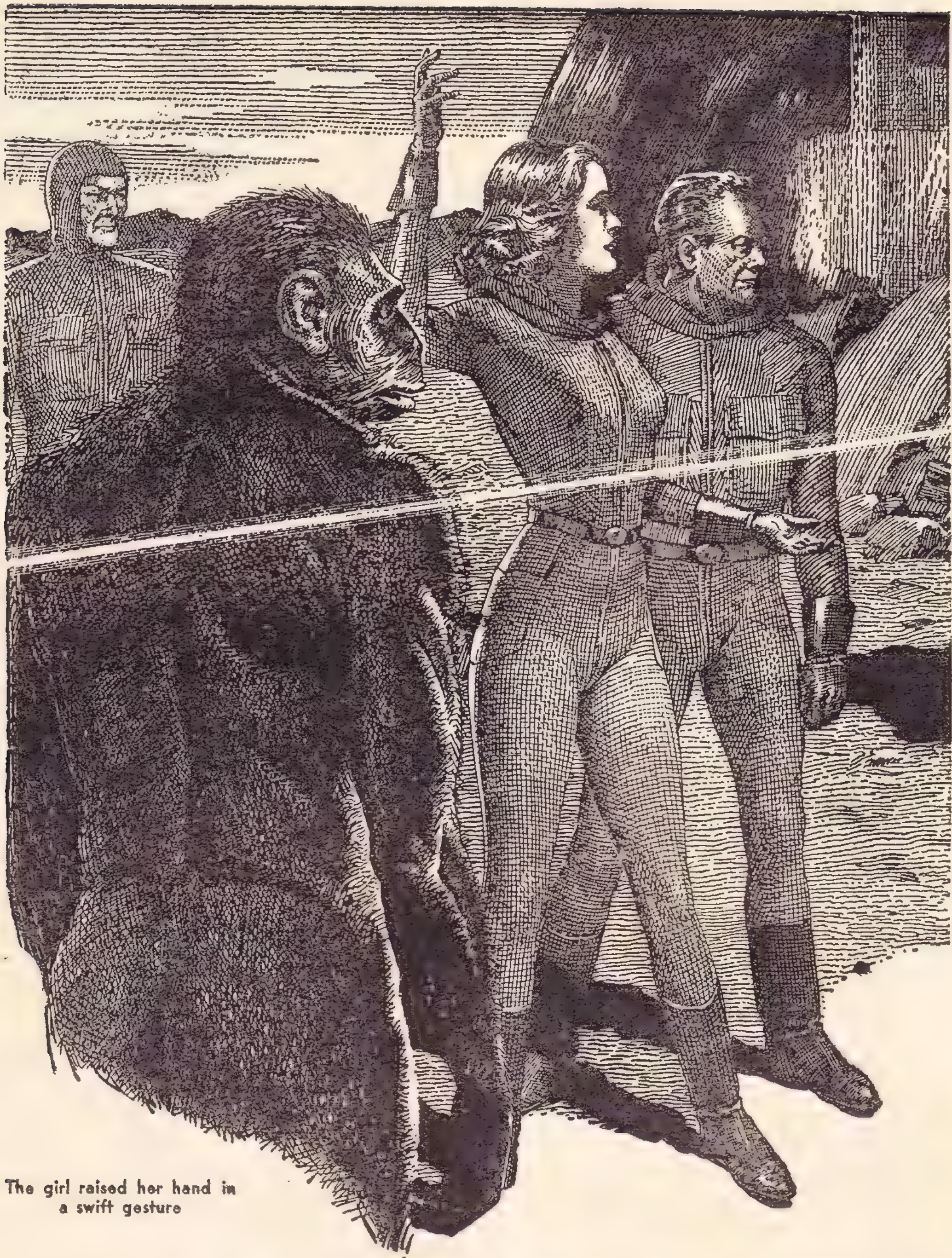
Kenniston started on down Mill

change a thing except to put a new Sun in the sky. And you call that an unexplained phenomenon.

Kenniston walked on down the street. He walked fast for the air was cold. He didn't stop to talk to the bewildered-looking people he met.

They were mostly men who had been on their way to work in Middletown's mills when it had happened. They stood now, puzzled, discussing the sudden flash and quake. The word Kenniston heard most often was "earthquake."

They didn't look too upset, these men. They looked a little excited and a little bit glad that something had happened to interrupt the drab daily routine. Some of them were staring up at that strange red corona-fringed Sun but they seemed more perplexed than disturbed.



The girl raised her hand in
a swift gesture

The air was cold and musty. And the red dusky sunlight was queer. But that hadn't disturbed these men too much. It was, after all, not much stranger than the chill and the lurid

light that often foreshadowed a Mid-western thunderstorm.

Kenniston turned in at the gate of the smoke-grimed brick structure that bore the sign, INDUSTRIAL RESEARCH



LABORATORIES. The watchman at the gate nodded to him unperturbedly as he let him through.

Neither the watchman nor any of Middletown's fifty thousand people, except a few city officials, knew that this supposedly industrial laboratory actually housed one of the key nerve-centers of America's atomic defense set-up.

Clever, thought Kenniston. It had been clever of those in charge of dispersal to tuck this key atomic laboratory into a prosaic little Midwestern mill-town.

"But not clever enough," he thought. No, not quite clever enough. The as-yet-unknown enemy had learned the secret and had struck the first stunning blow of his surprise attack at the hidden nerve-center of Middletown.

A super-atomic, to smash that nerve-center before war even started. Only the super-atomic had fizzled.

Or had it? The Sun was a different Sun. And the air was strange and cold.

Crisci met Kenniston by the entrance of the big brick building. Crisci was the youngest of the staff, a tall black-haired

youngster—and because he was the youngest he tried hard not to show emotion now.

"It looks like it's beginning," said Crisci, trying to smile. "Atomic Armageddon—the final fireworks."

"Where's Hubble?" Kenniston asked him.

Crisci gestured vaguely. "Over there. He's had us trying to call Washington but the wires are all dead and even the radio hasn't been able to get through yet."

Kenniston walked across the cluttered plant yard. Hubble, his Chief, stood looking up at the dusky sky and at the dull red Sun you could stare at without blinking. He was only fifty but he looked older at the moment, his graying hair disordered and his thin face tightly drawn.

"There isn't any way yet to figure out where that missile came from," Kenniston said.

Then he realized that Hubble's thoughts weren't on that, for the Chief only nodded abstractedly.

"Look at those stars, Kenniston."

"Stars? Stars, in the daytime?"

And then, looking up, Kenniston realized that you could see the stars now. You could see them as faint glimmering points all across the strangely dusky sky, even near the dull Sun.

"They're wrong," said Hubble. "They're very wrong."

Kenniston asked, "What happened? Did their super-atomic really fizzle?"

Hubble lowered his gaze and blinked at him. "No," he said softly. "It didn't fizzle. It went off."

"But—"

Kenniston didn't finish his protest for the other started back toward the Lab building.

"I've sent Grant for the Mayor and Police Chief," he said over his shoulder. "There'll have to be some emergency measures."

"But Hubble, if that super-atomic went off, why—"

Again Hubble ignored the question. He asked Crisci, "Any contact with Washington yet?"

Crisci shook his head. "Not a whisper. We can't understand it. Not one station outside Middletown is broadcasting as far as we can hear. Our own calls go completely unanswered."

Hubble seemed lost in musing thought for a moment. "Yes," he murmured, staring unseeingly past them both. "Yes."

The air was colder and there was a little wind that brought a musty taint to their nostrils. The red sunshine had no warmth in it.

"Keep trying," Hubble said finally. "Kenniston and I will be back in a half-hour."

He turned and led the way out of the Lab grounds. Across Mill Street and the cluttered railroad tracks loomed the big stilt-legged water-tower of Middletown.

"We'll go up there and have a look," said Hubble. "It's one of the highest points in town."

Kenniston still did not understand, but he was still a little too dazed to argue. He followed Hubble up the ladder of the water-tower.

They had to stop to rest once. The cold musty wind blew more strongly up here and it brought something in its breath that made Kenniston feel a strangeness.

ON the railed platform around the big high tank Kenniston looked down on the town. He saw knots of people gathered on the corners.

"I thought so," said Hubble, in a whisper.

It was then that Kenniston realized the other wasn't looking down at the town but out beyond it. He too looked.

He didn't get it at first. He didn't get it at all. He thought it was an illusion created by the strange dusky-red sunlight.

There should have been flat green smiling farmlands out there around the town—the flat lands of the Middle West.

But that was all gone. It was a completely different countryside that now lay around Middletown.

Ocher rolling plains stretched wanly under the dusky red Sun toward low hills that had never been there before.

The river was gone. There was nothing but the dull yellowish vegetation and the distant hills.

The wind blew over the barren world out there and stirred little clouds of dust that fell back again to earth. The Sun glared down like a great dull-red eye with lashes of writhing fire and the glimmering stars swung solemn in the dusky sky.

Kenniston's shocked mind frantically sought explanation for that impossible scene.

"Then the bomb somehow devastated the countryside instead of Middletown?"

"Would it take away a river and bring in its place those hills and that ocher vegetation?" Hubble said. "Would the bomb do that?"

"But then, what—?"

"It hit us, Kenniston. The bomb hit Middletown. It went off right over us and it did something queer to us.

"Nobody really knew what a super-atomic would do when it went off. There were logical theories and assumptions about it but nobody really *knew* anything except that the most violent concentrated force in history would be suddenly released.

"It was released, over Middletown. And it was violent. So violent that it ripped a hole in the continuum itself—the space-time frame of our cosmos.

"And we were flung through that hole, Kenniston. Middletown was flung through."

Kenniston stared blankly. "Flung through into what?"

"Into another part of the continuum, Kenniston. Into another part of the space-time frame."

Hubble gestured with a shaking hand. "That's our Sun but it is old now—very old. And the Earth out there now is an old Earth. And the stars—

"You looked at the stars, Kenniston, but you didn't see them. They're different. The constellations are distorted as only millions of years of time could distort them."

"Millions of years?" It was Kenniston who whispered now.

"Yes. The Sun is old and Earth is

dying, almost dead. And we, all of us and our little city, have been flung through into this far future of twilight and death."

CHAPTER II

Dying Planet

THE rest of the staff were waiting for them when they came back into the Lab grounds. A dozen men, ranging in age from Crisci to old Beitz, stood shivering in the chill red sunlight in front of the building.

They silently followed Hubble and Kenniston inside. But Kenniston turned toward his own office. "I've got to call Carol."

Hubble said, "Don't tell her, Ken. Not yet."

"No. No, I won't."

Carol Lane's voice was startled and anxious over the wire. "What was it, Ken? There are all sorts of wild stories—"

He didn't make the mistake of being too light about it. Carol was too intelligent for that. He made his voice serious but unalarmed. "We don't quite know yet what it was. Until we're sure I wish you and your aunt would stay in the house—off the street. Yes, I'll be over as soon as I can."

It hit Kenniston as he hung up—until now, his brain had only academically considered the thing that Hubble had said on the water-tower, the thing he had seen from there.

But now it began to come real. He felt a numb sickness. He felt as though, walking along Middletown's familiar streets, the world had begun slowly, slowly, to dissolve under him.

You read stories about time-travel. You read stories about clever machines that took you safely and comfortably into the future and brought you back again. You smiled a little when you read them because you knew that time was one of the great inviolable constants of

mature, that nothing had ever altered.

Nothing—until now. For never until now had so tremendous and concentrated a blast of energy been released as when this first super-atomic exploded.

Yes, Hubble's theory was sound. And he had seen that alien landscape out there for himself. He felt the relentlessly increasing cold. Yet Kenniston still could not quite believe.

Neither could the others of the staff. He knew it when he walked into Hubble's office and saw their faces.

Old Beitz was talking, in his rumbling voice. "But if the continuum were actually shattered why should it—"

His voice trailed off and his face grew drawn and strange. He seemed bewildered by what he was saying.

Hubble looked around the staring faces. "You won't believe, until you see for yourselves. I don't blame you. But in the meantime you must accept my statement as a working hypothesis."

Morrow cleared his throat and asked, "What about the people out there—the town? Are you going to tell them?"

"They have to know," Hubble said. "It'll get colder, very much colder, by night. They have to be told—the city officials first. There mustn't be any panic."

It was an upset and puzzled Mayor and Police Chief who arrived in a siren-screaming car a few minutes later.

Pudgy Mayor Garris almost ran to Hubble. "Doctor Hubble, what's happened? There are wild rumors of a surprise attack of a super-atomic bomb—"

"They're true," Hubble cut in. "A super-atomic was exploded an hour ago, for the first time in history, right over Middletown."

He let that sink in. Then he went on. "It didn't destroy us. We're lucky that way. But it did have certain—effects."

Kenniston, listening, looked up through the window at the dusky sky and the corona-fringed red Sun and felt the knot in his stomach tighten.

We were warned, he thought. *We were all warned for years that we were playing with forces too big for us.*

"'Certain effects?'" the pudgy Mayor was repeating. "What?"

Hubble told him with quiet bluntness. The two officials were stunned and then incredulous—defiantly incredulous.

"Middletown thrown into the future—the far future? A crazy joke—a theory—"

Hubble wore them down. Quietly, implacably, he pointed to the utterly alien landscape around the town, the deepening cold, the red aged Sun, the ceasing of all wire and radio communications.

His scientific points they could not understand. But those they took on faith, the faith which the people of the 20th Century had grown to have in the interpreters of the complex sciences they themselves could not understand.

IT got home at last. Kenniston saw it in the gray faces of the Mayor and Police Chief. Mayor Garris' voice was a whimper when he finally asked, "What are we going to do now?"

Hubble had an answer ready. "There mustn't be any panic. The people of Middletown have to learn the truth slowly. That means none of them must go outside town yet—or they'd learn at once. I'd suggest you announce the area outside town is possibly radioactive, contaminated, and forbid anyone to leave."

Police Chief Kimer nodded earnestly, glad of a problem within his comprehension. "I can put men and barricades at all the street ends to see to that."

"And our local National Guard company is assembling now at the Armory," put in Mayor Garris.

Hubble asked, "What about the city's utilities?"

"Everything seems to be working—power, gas and water," the Mayor answered.

They would, Kenniston thought. Middletown's coal-steam electric generation plant, its big water-tower and its artificial gas plant had all come through with them.

"They and all food and fuel must be rationed," Hubble was saying. "Proclaim it as an emergency measure."

Mayor Garris seemed to feel better at

being told what to do.

"Yes. We'll do that at once." Then he asked a little timidly, "Isn't there *any* way of getting in touch with the rest of the country?"

"The rest of the country," Hubble reminded, "is some millions of years in the dead past. You'll have to keep remembering that."

"Yes—of course. I keep forgetting," said the Mayor. He smiled a little pitifully and then took refuge in the task set him. "We'll get busy at once."

When the car had borne the two away Hubble looked haggardly at his silent colleagues. "They'll talk, of course. But if the news spreads slowly it won't be so bad. It'll give us a chance to find out a few things first."

Crisci began to laugh a little shrilly. "If it's true this is a side-splitting joke! This whole town flung into the end of the world and not even knowing it yet! All these fifty thousand people, not guessing yet that their Cousin Agnes in Indianapolis has been dead and dust for a billion years!"

"And they mustn't guess," Hubble said. "Not yet. Not until we know what we face on this future Earth."

He went on, thinking aloud. "We need to see what's out there, outside town, before we can plan anything. Kenniston, will you get a jeep and bring it back here? You and I will go out and have a look. Bring warm clothing too and spare gasoline. And—two guns."

Presently Kenniston was hurrying back down Mill Street toward a garage which he knew kept a jeep for road-service. It was cold and the Sun was red and strange and heatless but that wasn't what made Kenniston shiver as he strode along.

It was the unexpectedly everyday appearance of the town. When time and space gape open for the first time in history and you go through to the end of the world you expect it to be different.

Middletown didn't look different. The dusky star-sown sky did and the red Sun—but not the town. There were a lot of people on Mill Street—but then, there always were a good many. It was

the street of dingy factories and small plants that connected downtown Middletown with the shabby South Side and there were always buses, cars and pedestrians on it.

Kenniston knew a good many of these people by now but he didn't stop to talk with them. And somehow he didn't like to meet their eyes.

People like old Mike Ritter, the fat and red-faced watchman who sat in his little shack at the railroad crossing all day, with his little rat-terrier curled up companionably at his feet. The little terrier was crouched now, shivering, her eyes bright and moist with fear. But old Mike was placid as ever.

"Cold for June!" he hailed Kenniston. "The coldest I ever saw! I'm going to build a fire!"

And the little knot of tube-mill workers at the next corner in front of Joe's Lunch—two or three of whom he knew. They were arguing.

"Hey, there's Mr. Kenniston, one of the guys at the Lab! He'd know!"

Their puzzled faces as they asked, "Has a war started? Have you guys heard anything?"

Before he could answer, one asserted loudly, "Sure it's a war—didn't someone say an atomic bomb went off overhead and missed fire? Didn't you see the flash?"

"That was a big lightning-flash, wasn't it?"

"You're crazy! It nearly blinded me!"

Kenniston evaded them. "Sorry, boys—I don't know much more than you. There'll be some announcement soon."

And as he went on, a bewildered voice, "But if a war's started who's the enemy?"

Kenniston thought bitterly, *The enemy is a country that perished and was dust—how many millions of years ago?*

There were loafers on the Mill Street bridge, staring down at the muddy bed of the river and trying to explain the sudden vanishing of its water.

A woman called across the street from the lace curtains of an upstairs flat window to a fat housewife on the opposite front porch. "I'm missing every one of

my radio stories! The radio won't get anything but the Middletown station today!"

Kenniston was glad when he got to Bud's Garage. Bud Martin, a tall thin young man with a smudge of grease on his lip, was hearteningly efficient and normal looking as he reassembled a carburetor and criticized his harried-looking young helper at the same time.

"Sure, you can hire the jeep," he told Kenniston. "I'm too busy to answer any road-calls today anyway."

A man in a floury baker's apron stuck his head in the garage. "Hey, Bud, hear the news? The mills just shut down—all of them."

Bud straightened, his face rueful. "Oh, Lord, another recession! This'll ruin business—and me with this garage only half paid for!"

What was the use of telling him, Kenniston thought, that the mills had been hastily shut down to conserve precious fuel, that they would never open again.

He filled spare gasoline-cans, stacked them in the back of the jeep and drove northward.

Topcoats were appearing on Main Street now. There were knots of people on street corners and people waiting for buses were looking up in puzzled fashion at the red Sun and dusky sky. But the stores were open, housewives carried bulging shopping-bags, kids went by on bicycles. It wasn't too changed yet—not yet.

Nor was quiet Walters Avenue, where he had his rooms, though the row of maples were an odd color in the reddish light. Kenniston was glad his landlady was out. He didn't think he could face many more questions right now.

HE loaded his hunting kit—a .30-30 rifle and a 16-gauge repeating shotgun with boxes of shells—into the jeep. He put on a mackinaw, brought a leather coat for Hubble and remembered gloves.

Then, before re-entering the jeep, he ran down the street a half block to Carol Lane's house.

Her aunt met him at the door. Mrs.

Adams was stout, pink and worried. "John, I'm so glad you came! Maybe you can tell me what to do. Should I cover my flowers?"

She babbled on anxiously. "It seems so silly, on a June day. But it's so much colder. And the petunias and bleeding-heart are so *easily* frost-bitten. And the roses—"

"I'd cover them, Mrs. Adams," he told her. "The prediction is that it will be even colder."

She threw up her hands. "The weather these days! It never used to be like this. I don't know what's happened—"

She hurried away, to secure covering for the flowers—the flowers that had but hours to live.

It hit Kenniston with another of those sickening little shocks of realization.

No more roses on Earth, after today. No more roses, ever again!

"Ken, what's happened?"

He knew, before he even turned to face Carol, that he couldn't evade with her as he had with the others. She had too good a mind. It was what had held him to her after her dark prettiness had first attracted him.

"Are they true—the stories about an atom bomb going off over Middletown?"

Her dark eyes were searching his face. He didn't try to lie.

"Yes. They're true. Nobody was killed, Carol. That's to the good. But there are other effects."

He went on rapidly. "Hubble and I are going to investigate them now. I haven't time to talk but I'll be back soon. In the meantime will you promise to stay here—and inside?"

"It's something pretty bad, isn't it, Ken? I can see that in your face. All right—I won't ask questions. But come as soon as you can."

He thanked God for her steadiness as he ran back to the jeep. Hysteria would have been the last straw.

Hubble was waiting for him outside the Lab. He put on the leather coat and climbed into the jeep.

"All right, Ken—let's go out the south end of town. From the hills we glimpsed that way we can see more."

They found a barricade and police on guard at the southern end of town. There they were delayed, until the Mayor phoned through a hasty authorization for Hubble and Kenniston to go out "for inspection of the contaminated region."

The jeep rolled down a concrete road between green little suburban farms for less than a mile. Then the road and the green farmland suddenly ended.

From this sharp demarcation rolling ocher plains ran away endlessly to east and west. Not a tree, not a speck of green, broke the monotony. Only the ocher scrub and the dust and the wind.

Ahead the low hills rose, gaunt and naked, and above was the vast bowl of the sky, a cold darkness clamped down upon the horizons. Dim stars, and under them no sound but the cheerless whimper of the wind.

Its motor rattling and roaring, its body lurching over the unevenness of the ocher plain, the jeep bore them out into the silence of the dead Earth.

It struck him as so amusing that he laughed a little.

Hubble's fingers clamped his shoulder, hard enough to hurt even through the heavy coat. "Don't, Ken."

Kenniston turned his head. He saw that Hubble's face was drawn and gray, that his eyes were almost pleading.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Hubble nodded. "I know. I'm having a hard enough time hanging on myself."

They went on across the empty plain toward the low skeletal hills that were like bony knees thrust up from the ocher dust.

Soon the jeep was climbing an easy slope, its motor clattering and roaring. Somehow the familiar motor-sound only served to emphasize the fact that around them lay the silence and red dusk of world's end.

Kenniston wished that Hubble would say something, anything. But the older man did not and Kenniston's own tongue was frozen. He was lost in a nightmare and there was nothing to do but drive.

A sudden whistling scream came piping down the slope at them. Both men started violently. Hands slippery with cold sweat, Kenniston swung the jeep a little and saw a brown furry shape about the size of a small horse bolting over the ridge, moving with long awkward bounds.

Kenniston slowed down until he had stopped shaking. Hubble swore in a low whisper, a thing Kenniston had never heard him do before.

"Then there is still animal life on Earth—of a sort. And look there."

[Turn page]

CHAPTER III

Dead City

KENNISTON concentrated on the wheel, gripping it until his hands ached. He stared fixedly at the ground ahead, noting every rock, guiding the jeep carefully across shallow gullies, driving as though there were nothing in the universe but the mechanical act.

He envied the jeep its ability to chug unemotionally over the end of the world.

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He pointed to a deep little pit in the dusty earth with a ridge of freshly dark new soil around it.

"The thing was digging there. Probably for water. The surface is arid so it must dig to drink."

They stopped the jeep and examined the pit and the scrub around it. There were marks of teeth on the bark of the low shrubs.

"Rodential teeth," said Hubble. "Enormously larger than anything like them in our time but still recognizable."

They looked at each other, standing in the chill red light. Then Hubble turned back to the jeep.

"We'll go on."

They went on up the ridge. They saw two other pits made by the diggers but these were old and crumbling.

The blind red eye of the Sun watched them coldly. Kenniston thought of a frightened furry thing loping on and on over the other desolation that once long ago had been man's home.

They came up onto the low ridge and he stopped the jeep so they could look out across the red-lit plain that stretched beyond.

Hubble stared southwest and then his hands began to tremble a little. "Ken, do you see it?"

Kenniston looked that way, and saw.

The stunning shock of relief and joy! The wild gladness at finding that you and your people are not alone on a lifeless Earth!

Out there on the barren plain stood a city—a city of white buildings, completely enclosed and roofed and bounded by the great shimmering bubble of a transparent dome.

They looked and looked, savoring the exquisite delight of relief. They could see no movement in that domed city at this distance but just to see it was enough.

Then, slowly, Hubble said, "There are no roads. No roads across the plain."

"Perhaps they don't need roads. Perhaps they fly."

Instinctively both men craned their necks to examine the bleak heavens but there was nothing there but the wind

and the stars and the dim Sun with its Medusa crown of flames.

"There aren't any lights either," said Hubble.

"It's daytime," said Kenniston. "They wouldn't need lights. They'd be used to this dusk. They've had it a long time."

A sudden nervousness possessed him. He could barely perform the accustomed motions of starting the jeep again, grating the gears horribly, letting in the clutch with a lurching jerk.

"Take it easy," said Hubble. "If they're there there's no hurry. If they're not—" His voice was not quite steady. After a moment he finished. "There's no hurry then, either."

Words—nothing but words. It seemed to Kenniston that he could not bear the waiting. The plain stretched endlessly before him. The jeep seemed to crawl. Rocks and pits and gullies moved themselves maliciously into its path. The city mocked and came no nearer.

Kenniston bit his lips with a terrible impatience.

Then all at once the domed city was full before them. It loomed in the sky like a glassy mountain of fairy tale for from this viewpoint its curved surface reflected the sunlight.

HERE at last they struck a smooth broad road. It went straight toward a high arched portal in the glassy wall of the city. The portal was open.

"If they domed this city to keep it warm why should the door be open?" Hubble said.

Kenniston had no answer for that—no answer, except the one that his mind refused to accept.

They drove through the portal, were beneath the city dome. After the emptiness of the plain the weight of this city and its mighty shield were a crushing thing. It was warmer here beneath the dome. Not really warm but the air here lacked the freezing chill of the outside.

They went down a broad avenue, going slowly now, timidly, shaken by the beating of their own hearts. The noise of the motor was very loud in the stillness, echoed and re-echoed from many

facets of stone—loud, blasphemously loud, against the silence.

Dust blew heavily along the pavement, hung dun-colored veils across the open places where boulevards met. It lay in ruffled drifts in the sheltered spots, in doorways and arches and the corners of window ledges.

The buildings were tall and massive, infinitely more beautiful and simple in line than anything Kenniston had ever imagined. A city of grace and symmetry and dignity, made lovely with the soft tints and textures of plastics, the clean strength of metal and stone.

A million windows looked down upon the jeep and the two men from another time. A million eyes dimmed with cataracts of dust, empty, blind. Some were open, some shut but none saw.

The chill wind from the portal whispered in and out of sagging doorways, prowling up and down the streets, wandering restlessly across the wide parks that were no longer green and bright with flowers but only wastes of scrub and drifting dust. And nowhere, nowhere was there anything but the little wind that stirred.

Yet Kenniston drove on. It seemed too terrible a thing to accept, that this great domed city was only a shell, an abandoned corpse, that Middletown was still alone on the face of the dying Earth.

He drove on, shouting, crying out, sounding the horn in a sort of frenzy, both of them straining their eyes into the shadowy streets. Surely somewhere in this place that men had built there must be a human face, a human voice! Surely in all these countless empty rooms there was space enough for life!

But there was no life.

Kenniston drove more and more slowly. He ceased to sound the horn and call out. Presently he ceased even to look. He allowed the jeep to roll to a halt in a great central plaza. He cut the motor and the silence descended upon him and Hubble like an avalanche.

He bowed his head in his hands and sat that way for a long time. He heard Hubble's voice saying, "They're all dead and gone."

Kenniston raised his head. "Yes. Dead and gone, all of them, long ago." He looked around the beautiful buildings. "You know what that means, Hubble. It means that Earth won't support human life any more. Even in this domed city, they couldn't live."

"But why couldn't they?" Hubble said. He pointed to a wide space of low flat open tanks that covered acres of the city nearby. "Those were hydroponic tanks, I think. They could raise food in them."

"If they had water. Perhaps that's what ran out on them."

Hubble shook his head. "Those ratlike digging animals we saw could find water. Men could find it too. I'm going to see."

He got out of the jeep and walked toward the dusty tanks nearby. Kenniston dully watched him.

But presently he too climbed out and began looking into the buildings around the plaza. He could see little but lofty shadowy rooms, illuminated only by the sad light that filtered through dusty windows.

In some of the rooms was heavy furniture of metal, massive yet graceful. In others nothing but the quiet dust. A great sadness and futility came upon Kenniston as he went slowly around the silent streets.

What did it matter, after all, that a town lost out of its time was facing death? Here a race had died and the face of the Earth was barren wilderness.

Kenniston was roused from his sick numbness by Hubble's voice.

"There's still water here, Ken—big reservoirs of it under those tanks. So that isn't what ended them. It was something else."

"What difference does it make now what it was?" Kenniston said heavily.

"I'd like to find out," Hubble said. "But there isn't time now. The night and cold are coming. We'd better go."

With a start Kenniston realized that the Sun was sinking in the west, that the shadow of the mighty buildings lay black upon the streets of the city. He shivered a little and led the way back to

the jeep. Again its clattering roar profaned the deathly silence as they drove back to and through the portal.

"We have to get back," Hubble was saying. "They don't know yet in Middletown what they're facing."

"We can't tell them of this place," Kenniston said. "We daren't, Hubble. If they learn that there are no more people, that they're maybe all alone on Earth, they'll go mad with panic."

The Sun was very low, a splotch of crimson that bulked huge in the western sky as the jeep whined and lurched toward the ridge. The stars were brighter, the unfamiliar stars that had done with man. The cold became more piercing by the minute as the dusk deepened.

A HORROR of the dying planet's gathering night gripped both men. They uttered exclamations of shaken relief when the jeep topped the ridge.

For there ahead, incongruous on this nighted elder Earth, gleamed the familiar street lights of Middletown. The bright axes of Main Street and Mill Street, the fainter gridiron of the residential suburbs, the red neon beer signs of South Street—all shining out on the icy night of a dead world.

"I forgot about anti-freeze in the jeep's radiator," Kenniston said, inconsequentially.

It was that cold now. The wind had the edge of a razor of ice and even in their heavy coats they were shivering.

Hubble nodded. "People have to be warned about things like that. They don't yet know how cold it will be to-night."

Kenniston said hopelessly, "But after tonight—when the fuel and food are gone, what then? Is there any use struggling?"

"Why, no, if you look at it that way there's no use," Hubble said. "Stop the jeep and we'll lie down beside it and freeze to death quickly and comfortably."

Kenniston drove in silence for a moment. Then, "You're right. We've got to keep fighting."

"It isn't completely hopeless," Hubble

said. "That dead domed city—it's only one city. There may be others on Earth that aren't dead. People, help, companionship. But we have to hang on until we find them."

He added, as they neared the town, "Drive to City Hall, first."

The barricade at the end of Jefferson Street had a leaping bonfire beside it now. The police guards and a little knot of uniformed National Guardsmen, had been staring out into the gathering darkness. They greeted the jeep excitedly. They asked eager questions, their breath steaming on the frosty air. Hubble steadily refused answers. There would be announcements soon. They must wait.

But the terrierlike little police captain who cleared a way through the group for them had his own questions before they left him.

"They're talking stuff around City Hall about the whole Earth being dead. What's there to this story about falling through time?"

Hubble evaded. "We're not very sure of anything yet. It'll take time to find out."

The police captain asked shrewdly, "What did you find out there? Any sign of life?"

"Why, yes, there's life out there," Hubble said. "We didn't meet any people yet but there's life."

Furred and furtive life timidly searching for its scant food, Kenniston thought. *The last life, the poor last creatures to inherit Earth.*

Swept by an icy wind, South Street was as empty-looking as on a February night. But the red beer signs beckoned clamorously and the bars seemed full.

Bundled-up children were hanging about the pond in Mill Street Park. Kenniston realized the reason for their whooping excitement when he saw the thin ice that already sheeted the pond.

The cold was already driving the crowd off Main Street. Yet puzzled-looking people still clotted at corners.

Hubble said suddenly, "They have to be told, Ken—now. It isn't fair, not to tell them."

"They won't believe," Kenniston said. "If they do it'll start a panic."

"Perhaps. We'll have to risk that. I'll get the Mayor to make the announcement over the radio station."

When Kenniston started to follow Hubble out of the jeep at City Hall the other stopped him. "I won't need you now, Ken. And I know you're worried about Carol. Go on and see she's all right."

Kenniston drove north through streets already almost deserted. The cold was deepening and the green leaves of trees and shrubs hung strangely limp and lifeless. He stopped at his rooms. His landlady's torrent of questions he answered with a reference to a forthcoming announcement that sent her scurrying to her radio.

He went up to his rooms and dug out a bottle of Scotch and drank off half a tumbler straight. Then he went on to Carol's house. From its chimney, as from all the chimneys along the street, smoke was curling up. He found Carol and her aunt beside a fireplace blaze.

"It won't be enough," Kenniston told them. "You'll need the furnace going and the storm-windows up."

"In June?" wailed Mrs. Adams, shocked again by the crazy vagaries of weather.

"Yes. It's going to be below zero before morning. I'll see to it. And—turn the radio on and keep it going."

It seemed strange to Kenniston that the end of the world meant fussing with furnace-shakers and ashes in a cold basement, hauling out storm-windows and swearing at catches that wouldn't catch.

Carol came outside as he finished with the windows and he heard her low startled cry. He turned, alert for any danger.

But she was looking at the eastern sky. An enormous, dull-copper shield was rising there. The Moon—but a Moon many times magnified, swollen to monstrous size, its glaring craters and plains and mountain-chains frighteningly clear to the unaided eye.

She turned to him. "Ken, I knew

something was terribly wrong. But this cold and that—"

Mrs. Adams' voice fluttered from the doorway. "Mayor Garris is going to make an important announcement, the radio says!"

Kenniston followed them inside. Yes, an important announcement, he thought—the most important ever. World's end should be announced by a voice of thunder speaking from the sky, by the trumpets of the archangels—not by the scared hesitating voice of Mayor Bertram Garris.

The Mayor, politicianlike, tried even now to shift responsibility a little. He told what he had to tell but he prefixed it with, "Doctor Hubble and his associates are of the opinion that—" and, "It would appear from scientific evidence that—"

But he told it. And the silence that followed in the living room of Mrs. Adams' comfortable house was, Kenniston knew, only a drop in the pool of stunned silence that at this moment whelmed all Middletown.

Later, he knew, would come Mrs. Adams' wails and Carol's questions. But at this moment they could only look at him with frightened faces, pleading for a reassurance that he could not give them.

The radio broke it. An announcer's voice that was a little too strainedly cheerful chattered and presently then a phonograph record was singing with the voice of a girl dead these millions of years.

Perished Earth of long ago, singing its own strange requiem into the night and cold and silence that now were closing down like death on Middletown!

CHAPTER IV

Road of the Ages

KENNISTON was aroused next morning by the sharp summons of the telephone. He awoke with chill stiff limbs on the sofa, where he had

dozed fitfully during the night. He had fired the coal furnace a half-dozen times but the house had an icy chill and white frost was thick on the storm windows.

He stood up, heavy with sleep, and then as the telephone rang again he suddenly remembered. The whole crushing weight of yesterday descended upon him.

It was Hubble on the telephone. "Get over here, Ken. The Keystone coal yard. There's trouble!"

He hung up. Kenniston stood for a moment, his hands and feet numb, his breath steaming faintly even in the room.

Then he dressed and went hastily to the cellar. He dug deeper into the dregs of the winter coal. There would not be enough for another night.

Carol came downstairs as he pulled on his heavy coat. "The phone woke me. Is it—"

She did not finish. It was ridiculous to inquire whether the call had brought bad news. They were all living in a horror-dream where everything was bad.

She wore her fur coat over her night things. Kenniston noticed that her eyes were heavy and shadowed as though she had not slept much. Her bare ankles, between the coat and the woolly slippers, were blue with cold. Yet she smiled at him.

Kenniston took her in his arms. He felt an aching pity for her, a blind desire to make everything somehow all right so that Carol would not have to be so brave and tender that it broke his heart.

"It was Hubble," he told her. "He wants me for a while. You stay in the house and keep the furnace going. I'll be back as soon as I can." He kissed her. "We'll find an answer to it all somehow, Carol."

His words had an empty sound. She said, "Be careful, Ken," and he left her, going out into the bitter morning. It was still half dark for the sullen Sun had not quite risen, sprawling in the east like some bloated monster heavy with blood.

He refilled the jeep's radiator that he had drained the night before. It was very still, he noticed. The mill whistles, the bustling delivery trucks, the peremptory voices of locomotives quarreling at the Junction—all were gone. Even the children were silent now, afraid of the red cold dawn.

The roses all were dead and the frost had blackened the summer shrubs and trees. The streets seemed empty of all life as Kenniston drove the jeep down Main Street. He turned aside on Vine Street. Presently he saw ahead the Keystone coal yard and there were life and noise enough.

Policemen and National Guardsmen formed a cordon around the yard and its great black heaps of coal. They faced a crowd—an ugly crowd, still only muttering but bound for trouble.

Kenniston saw people he knew in that crowd, people who sat on their front porches in the warm summer nights and talked with neighbors and laughed. Mill hands, merchants, housewives—solid decent folk, turned wolfish now with cold and the fear of dying.

Hubble met him inside the yard. Police Chief Kimer was there and Borchard, who owned the yard.

"They were starting to loot the coal piles," Hubble said. "Poor devils, it was summer and they didn't have much fuel. Some of them burned their furniture last night to keep alive."

He went on. "We don't want to have to kill anyone. You talk to them, Ken. You've got to know them better than we have, they'll trust you more. Tell them we've found a solution."

"A solution?"

"There's only one, Ken. You know what it is."

Kenniston looked sharply at Hubble. "You mean that domed city out there?"

"Yes. It retains heat to a considerable degree at night. We saw that. That's why it was built—how long ago?"

"We have to go there, Ken, all of us—and today! This whole town's short on fuel. We can't go through another night here."

"But when they see that city—when

they realize that Earth is a dead world?"

"We'll have to take care of that when it comes. Tell them to go to their homes and wait. Tell them that by evening they'll be safe. Tell them anything you like but make them go."

Kenniston scrambled up a black ridge of coal to stand above the crowd. From outside the cordon they snarled at him when he began.

BUT he shouted them down, calling out the names of the ones he knew, ordering them to listen—being masterful while his heart pounded with the same dread that drove the men and women in the street.

"Don't talk to us about law when it's the end of the world!" yelled a woman.

"It's the end of nothing unless you lose your heads," Kenniston hammered. "The Mayor is standing by now to give you what you want—an answer to how you're going to live and be safe.

"Your lives and the lives of your families depend on how you cooperate. Go home to your radios and wait for the orders!"

"Will they give us coal?" shouted a burly mill-hand.

"Coal, food, everything you need. Nobody's going to cheat anyone. We're all in the same boat. We'll stay in or out together. Now go home and keep your families together and wait."

He called suddenly to the men on guard, "You, too! Get going. The Mayor's announcement is more important than this coal."

He climbed back down from the black heap, wondering whether his feeble attempt at psychology would work. Borchard started angry remonstrance about dismissal of the guards but Hubble shut him up.

"It worked," he said. "Look, they're going. Now come with me, Ken. I'll need you to help me with the Mayor."

It seemed impossible that the pudgy little Mayor could be a problem. He had been so docile, so pathetically eager to take advice and follow orders. But when, in City Hall, Hubble confronted him

with the plan to evacuate Middletown, Mayor Garriss' face took on a mulish look.

"It's crazy," he said. "Take up a whole city of fifty thousand people and transport them in one day to another place we don't know anything about? It's insane!"

"There are enough cars, buses and trucks to transport the population and supplies. There's enough gasoline to run them."

"But this other city—what do we know about it? Nothing. There might be any kind of danger there. No—I was born in Middletown. I've lived here all my life. I've worked hard to get where I am. I just spent five thousand dollars to redecorate my house and I'm not going to leave it."

He glared at them and his plump body trembled.

Hubble said gently, "We're all afraid, Mr. Garriss. It's a hard thing to do. People have their roots and they can't break them easily all at once. But we must go. We must seek shelter or die."

The Mayor shook his head. "My wife and daughter—they've been hysterical all night, pleading with me to do something, to make the things go as they always have. This has been an awful shock to them. I don't think they could stand any more."

"Slap their faces, Mr. Garriss," Hubble said brutally. "This has been a shock to all of us. The people are waiting for that announcement. Will you make it?"

"I can't." Garriss' face crinkled like that of a child about to cry. "Honestly, gentlemen, I can't."

Kenniston thought of Carol, shivering in her fur coat, struggling with the last shovels of coal, and the thought made him grasp Garriss savagely by the shirt-front.

"All right, *don't* make it!" he snapped. "I'll make one myself. I'll tell the people of Middletown that there's a way to save them but that Mayor Garriss won't hear of it. I'll tell them they must die of cold because their Mayor is a coward. Shall I tell them that, Mr. Garriss?"

Kenniston thought he had never seen

a man turn so white. "They'd tear me to pieces," whispered Garris. "No, no—don't." He looked piteously at Hubble. "Isn't there any other way?"

Hubble said flatly, "No."

The Mayor was silent for a long moment: Then he sighed. "Very well," he whispered. "I'll tell them."

On the way to the broadcasting station Kenniston looked at Middletown. The big houses, standing in lordly pride on the North Side—the little houses in close-set rows with their tiny gardens—the people in those houses would not want to leave them.

Hubble made out a list on the back of an envelope and gave it to Garris. Things that people must take with them, he listed. Blankets, warm clothing, utensils—nothing else. Kenniston thought of Mrs. Adams and her roses.

In a low tired voice, bereft now of pomposity and guile, the Mayor spoke to the people of Middletown.

"So we must leave Middletown temporarily," he concluded. He repeated the word—"Temporarily. The domed city out there—it will be a little cold too but not so cold as unprotected Middletown. We can live there until—until things clear up.

"Get your clothing and your blankets and your cars ready. If you have no car you'll be carried in the buses. Please cooperate to save all our lives. Please—"

Very quickly then Kenniston lost track of his own emotions in the whirl of urgent tasks.

CITY HALL became a nerve-center. The police and National Guard officers were already there and other men were called in—the wholesale grocers, the warehouse men, the heads of trucking and bus and van lines.

The radio chattered incessantly, urging, cajoling, giving orders. Hubble was the driving force but he let Mayor Garris give the orders. Middletown knew its Mayor as authority.

McLain, the big rawboned manager of the largest trucking company, proved a tower of strength. He had been a motor transport officer in the last war and

knew something about moving men and supplies.

"You'll have a traffic madhouse and won't get these people all out for days," he said crisply. "It's got to be organized by wards. There have to be quarters in your domed city assigned for each ward so they can move into their own streets when they get there."

"That makes sense," Hubble nodded. "I'll go ahead to the other city with some men and prepare for your coming. Will you organize the march? Kenniston can lead you there when it's time."

McLain nodded brusquely, sat down at someone else's desk and began to fire orders.

Police and National Guardsmen were dispatched to each ward with a responsible man heading each squad. They were ordered to take the streets house by house to assure complete evacuation.

McLain was the one who thought of the patients in Middletown Hospital and set men to collecting ambulances, hearses, whatever would carry the sick comfortably. The police patrol wagons and a few big army trucks from the armory he assigned to move the prisoners in the jail.

Fleets of trucks were started to the warehouses with hasty lists of the food and other emergency supplies that must go with them.

"We can run a truck line back to Middletown for more supplies later," McLain told Kenniston. "This stuff, we'll need right away."

Hubble, with a score of selected men, had already departed for the domed city.

It was nearly noon when Kenniston left City Hall with McLain to check the progress of preparations.

Under the cold red eye of the Sun Middletown seethed with an excited activity unmatched even by V-J Day of a few years before. Cars were being hastily loaded, piled high on roofs and fenders. Children were being called together, barking dogs being caught and leashed, families gathering in excited haste.

A roar of motors filled the wintry air—motors of great trucks rumbling to

and fro from the warehouses—motors of siren-screaming police cars—sputtering motors of old cars being agonizedly coaxed to life.

The people on the streets, the people hurrying with bundles and children and logs, looked mostly a little dazed. Some were laughing. Only a few women were sobbing.

McLain and Kenniston rode down in the jeep to the center of town, the Square. This was the downtown First Ward of Middletown.

"We'll move the wards out in order," McLain told Kenniston. "You take charge of this one since you're to lead the way."

Police and National Guardsmen were already forming up cars on South Jefferson Street—Cadillacs, Buicks, Fords, and other ancient models. City and school buses were crowded with those who had no cars, piled high with their belongings. Policemen on motorcycles roared past.

McLain boomed rapid orders. "Get sidecars on those motorcycles—if the way is as rough as Kenniston says they won't make it."

"Divide up the garage tow-trucks as they come in—divide them evenly between wards to haul any car that conks out!"

And to a worried National Guard officer, "No! What the devil use would we have for your field-guns? Leave 'em in the Armory and bring cots, blankets, camp-equipment instead!"

Then McLain commandeered a car, jumped in and shouted back to Kenniston, "Have 'em ready to move out by three o'clock! I'll have the Tube Mill whistle sounded for a starting signal!"

And he was gone, racing off to the other ward gathering-points. Kenniston found himself faced by police, Guardsmen, deputies, officials, all clamoring for orders.

"What are we going to do with these cars? Half of them are so overloaded they'll never get anywhere!"

Kenniston saw that. The arriving cars were piled not only with bedding and other essentials but with radios, mu-

sical instruments, big framed family portraits, hobby-horses, every sort of possession.

"Tear some of that junk off," he ordered. "Form up all the way down South Jefferson—but only two abreast for some of those South Side streets are narrow."

The squad leaders rapidly reported in on their assigned streets. "Everybody's out of Adams Street! Perry Street! Lincoln Avenue—"

But, "We haven't got 'em all out of North Street, Mr. Kenniston! Some of those old people just won't go!"

Kenniston swore and jumped back into the jeep and drove around to North Street.

IT was a street of shabby ancient brick houses only two blocks off Main Street. The first person he saw there was a grim-looking shawled old woman standing with folded arms on her front porch.

"I'm not leaving my home," she snapped to Kenniston before he could speak. "I've lived in this house all my life and my mother before me. I'll not leave it now."

She sniffed scornfully. "The idea of the whole town taking up and running away just because it's got a little cold!"

Kenniston, baffled, saw a little girl of six peering at him from inside the window of the house.

"That your granddaughter?" he asked. "Listen. She'll be dead tomorrow—stone, frozen dead unless you bring her and your warm clothes and blankets along now."

The shawled old woman stared at him. Then, her voice suddenly dull, asked him, "Where do I go?"

He hastened on along the street. A peppery old man was being carried out in a wheelchair and was viciously striking with his cane.

"Blasted foolishness!" he was swearing.

They got them into the waiting buses and hastily loaded on their belongings. Then Kenniston raced back to the Square. His watch said two-twenty and

he knew how far they were from ready.

On the Square, under the big sycamore tree, a burning-eyed rigid man was shouting to no one, "End of world—punishment for sin—"

Lauber, the truck driver McLain had left in charge of the First Ward caravan under Kenniston, came running up to him on South Jefferson. "These people are crazy!" he panted. "The ones already here want to start right now—and they don't even know where they're going!"

Kenniston saw that the police had drawn a barricade of trucks across the street some blocks southward. Cars were surging against it, motors roaring, drivers shouting, horns sounding in deafening chorus.

Panic! He knew it was in the air. He had known there was danger of it when the Mayor had made his broadcast. Yet only terrible fear could make people leave their lifelong homes.

He rode along the line, shouting, "Form up! Form in line! If you jam the street we'll be left behind!"

He couldn't even be heard. Limousines, trucks, jalopies—they crowded, banged fenders, bumped and recoiled and pressed forward again. And the horns never stopped their shrieking cacophony.

Kenniston, sweating now despite the frozen chill of the air, prayed that the gathering panic would not burst into violence.

At the front of the surging, roaring mass, he found Mayor Garris. And the Mayor's pallid face showed that he too was infected.

"Shouldn't we go?" he shouted to Kenniston over the uproar of horns and motors. "Everyone seems ready here!"

"McLain's running the traffic movement and we've got to stick to his orders!" he shouted back.

"But if these people break loose—" the Mayor began.

He stopped. Over the shrieking horns and thundering motors a new sound was rising. A distant banshee wail, a far-away scream that swelled into a hoarse giant howl.

The shrieking auto-horns, the shouting voices from the cars, fell silent. Only the sound of motors was background to that rising and falling scream that wailed across Middletown like a requiem.

"That's the mill whistle!" cried Lauber. "That's the signal!"

Kenniston sent the jeep jumping ahead. "Okay, let those trucks roll! But keep people in line back of them! No stampeding!"

The big Diesels that barricaded the way began to snort and rumble, then started to move out, ponderous as elephants.

Kenniston's jeep, with the Mayor sitting beside him, swung in front. But almost at once cars behind pressed to get around them.

"Run the trucks three abreast in front!" he shouted to Lauber. "It'll keep them from getting around!"

Down Jefferson Street, down over the muddy bed of the vanished river, past the old houses with their doors carefully shut and locked, past the playground that looked as forlorn as though it knew the children were going, never to return.

Past Home Street, where the Sixth-Ward caravan was forming, where police and deputies had to shout threats to hold back those who saw the First Ward moving out. Past the mills, and the beer-signs of South Street, where a drunken man shouted at them and waved a bottle from an upstairs window. Past the rows of drab frame houses and the brave little beds of flowers that were blackened now with frost.

Kenniston saw it ahead—the line of demarcation, the boundary between the past and what was now Earth. And the Mayor saw it too, looking for the first time on what lay outside Middletown.

"Is it all like this?" asked the Mayor in a whimpering whisper. "Is the whole Earth like this, now?"

The rolling ocher plains were all about them, barren and drab beneath the great fire-lashed red eye of the Sun.

The cold wind whooped around the head of the caravan as they started to climb the easy slope toward the ridge.

Behind them Diesels, jalopies, buses, shiny station-wagons, rolled with roaring, sputtering, purring motors.

Kenniston looked back down at the caravan he led. Already the other wards were moving out and he rode at the head of a huge articulated serpent of vehicles crawling endlessly out of Middletown.

Caravan not only out of the town but out of the Earth that was gone forever into this dying elder Earth! Caravan marching in one day along the road of the ages from past to future!

CHAPTER V

Middletown Calling!

THAT night Kenniston and Carol walked down a dark main avenue of the domed city. They walked toward music.

"I can't give you anything but love, baby!"

It came from just ahead, from the high arched doorway of one of the graceful white buildings. A big burly Middletowner in a red plaid jacket waved to them from that door as they went by.

"Sure glad I brought the little phonograph along!" he told Kenniston. "Sort of makes the place more homelike, doesn't it?"

"It's too loud," said a sharp feminine voice inside. "It's keeping Neddy awake."

"Aw, the kid likes it."

"That's the only thing I've plenty of, baby!"

Kenniston thought that the streets of tall white buildings looked down with their windows as with eyes—amazed, bewildered. This city beneath the shimmering, starlit dome had had silence for a long long time—silence and the slow swing of the cold red Sun and the farther stars.

Could a city remember, Kenniston wondered? Did this one remember the old days of its builders, the lovers who had walked its ways and the children who had known its nooks and corners?

Was it glad that men had come again or did it regret loss of its age-long stillness and peace?

The city was still dark except for candlelight from a few doorways, and a lamplight from the big buildings on the plaza where the municipal government had taken quarters. And it was almost quiet, for most of the Middletowners were asleep now in their assigned quarters, rolled in blankets on camp cots, mattresses or floors.

But it was a sleeping city now, not a dead one. The tinny phonograph sang on behind them. A baby wailed from inside a dark doorway and was hastily soothed. Dogs—the dogs no Middletowner had left behind—barked defiance to alien ghosts.

All along the street the cars were parked—the Nashes and Chevrolets and Plymouths, incongruous in this dream-like city of elder Earth. The cars that had poured into New Middletown, as the domed city was now called, all that afternoon and evening.

Carol shivered a little and buttoned her topcoat. "It's getting colder."

Kenniston nodded. "But not bitterly so—only like an October night back in our own time. We can stand that. Even without heat we can stand it for awhile."

She looked up at him, her eyes dark in the white blur of her face. "But how will we *live* here, Ken? I mean when the food from Middletown's warehouses runs out?"

He and Hubble had known that question would come up and had the answer for it. Not a perfect answer but the only one.

"There are big hydroponic tanks farther over in the city, Carol. The people here raised their food in them. We can do the same. There are plenty of seeds in Middletown."

"But water?"

"Lots of it," he answered promptly. "Big underground reservoirs that must tap deep water-bearing strata. Hubble tested it and it's perfectly safe."

They walked on to the edge of the plaza. Now the Moon was rising, that

copper-colored, unreal big Moon that was so much nearer Earth than in the old times.

Its coppery light poured through the dome upon the city. The white towers dreamed. The chill deepened. The whole mighty past of dead Earth seemed to crush down upon Kenniston. Millions of years, trillions of lives full of pain and hope and struggle, and all for what? For this?

Carol felt it too for she pressed closer to him. "Are they all dead, Ken? All the human race but ourselves?"

He and Hubble had the answer for that too, the answer they would have to give to everyone. "There's no reason to assume that. There may be other cities, still peopled. If so we'll soon contact them."

"But if this city is deserted wouldn't the others be too?"

He had no answer to that, even for himself. He was spared reply by a stealthy touch on his ankle and a faint mewling at his feet.

Startled, he stepped back. But Carol reached down and picked up the small kitten that had wandered up to them in the moonlight.

"Some child brought it and it wandered away," he said, a little ashamed of his start.

"And it's afraid—it's afraid of this place that isn't Middletown," she said, letting the furry little creature burrow contentedly into her topcoat. "I'll take care of it."

He left her at the dark doorway of the building whose lower floor she and her aunt shared with a score of other women. He went on to his own quarters.

They were in the building beside the big structure that was now City Hall. Mayor Garris had insisted that he and Hubble and the others of the Lab, McLain and others too be quartered nearby.

HUBBLE was sleeping calmly in his blankets on the floor of the big dusty room. So was Beitz, with the slight groaning stirrings of sleeping age. But Crisci lay wakeful in a shaft

of moonlight, his eyes looking up into the darkness of the ceiling.

Kenniston remembered something with a sudden pang. He went over to Crisci and whispered. "I'm sorry, Louis. I never thought till now about Eleanor."

"Why would you think about that?" Crisci's low voice was toneless. "Why would you when all this has happened?"

He went on, as tonelessly. "Besides it was all over a long time ago. For millions of years now she's been dead."

Kenniston lingered a moment, seeking something to say, remembering Crisci's proud introduction of the girl he was soon to marry—the girl who lived fifty miles away from Middletown.

He could find nothing to say. Crisci's tragedy must be repeated tonight among many thousands here who could not sleep. The mother whose son had gone to California, the wife whose husband had been upstate on a business trip, the lovers, the families, the friends, divided forever by the great gulf of time.

Kenniston felt a great thankfulness that Carol had come through with him. And too he felt strangely thankful now that he himself had no living family to lose.

He awoke next morning to evidence that the Mayor's hastily improvised organization was working. The evidence was the smell of coffee.

Hubble handed him a cup. "Community kitchens are going in every ward now on oil and gasoline ranges. The Red Cross chapter helped a lot on that."

Kenniston, lighting his morning cigarette, paused suddenly. "I just happened to think—"

Hubble grinned a little. "Yes. I know. You just thought about tobacco. You and a lot of people will soon have to do without."

He told what was going forward. "McLain's gone back to Middletown with trucks to bring gasoline-engines and pumps. We have to get water flowing in the city's system again at once and it may be a long time before we can figure out its pumping power. They seem to be atomic engines of some sort but I'm not sure."

"Food and medicine will all go into guarded ware-rooms. There'll be ration-tickets printed at once. Use of cars is forbidden of course. Everybody is restricted to their own ward temporarily to prevent accidents in exploration. We've got crews organized to explore the city."

Kenniston nodded. He drew the last drags of a cigarette suddenly precious before he spoke.

"That's all good. But the main problem will be morale, Hubble. I don't believe these people can take it if they find out they're the last humans left."

Hubble looked worried. "I know. But there must be people left somewhere. This city wasn't abandoned because of sudden disaster. They may just have gone to other better cities."

"There wasn't a whisper on the radio from outside Middletown," Kenniston reminded.

"No—but I believe they used something different from our radio system. That's what I want you for this morning, Ken. Beitz last night found a communication center in a building near

here. It has big apparatus that he thinks was for televisior communication. That's more in your field than ours."

Kenniston felt a sharp interest, the interest of the technician that not even world's end could completely kill. "I'd like to see that."

He went out with Hubble and Beitz into the cold red morning, half dreading to meet the stunned bewildered faces of Middletown's people. But he felt sharp surprise as he looked down the plaza and the streets.

A little band of children came whooping down the nearest street, a small woolly dog racing beside them with frantic barking.

Two plump women, one of whom was buttoning a reluctant small boy into his jacket, called to each other from neighboring doorways.

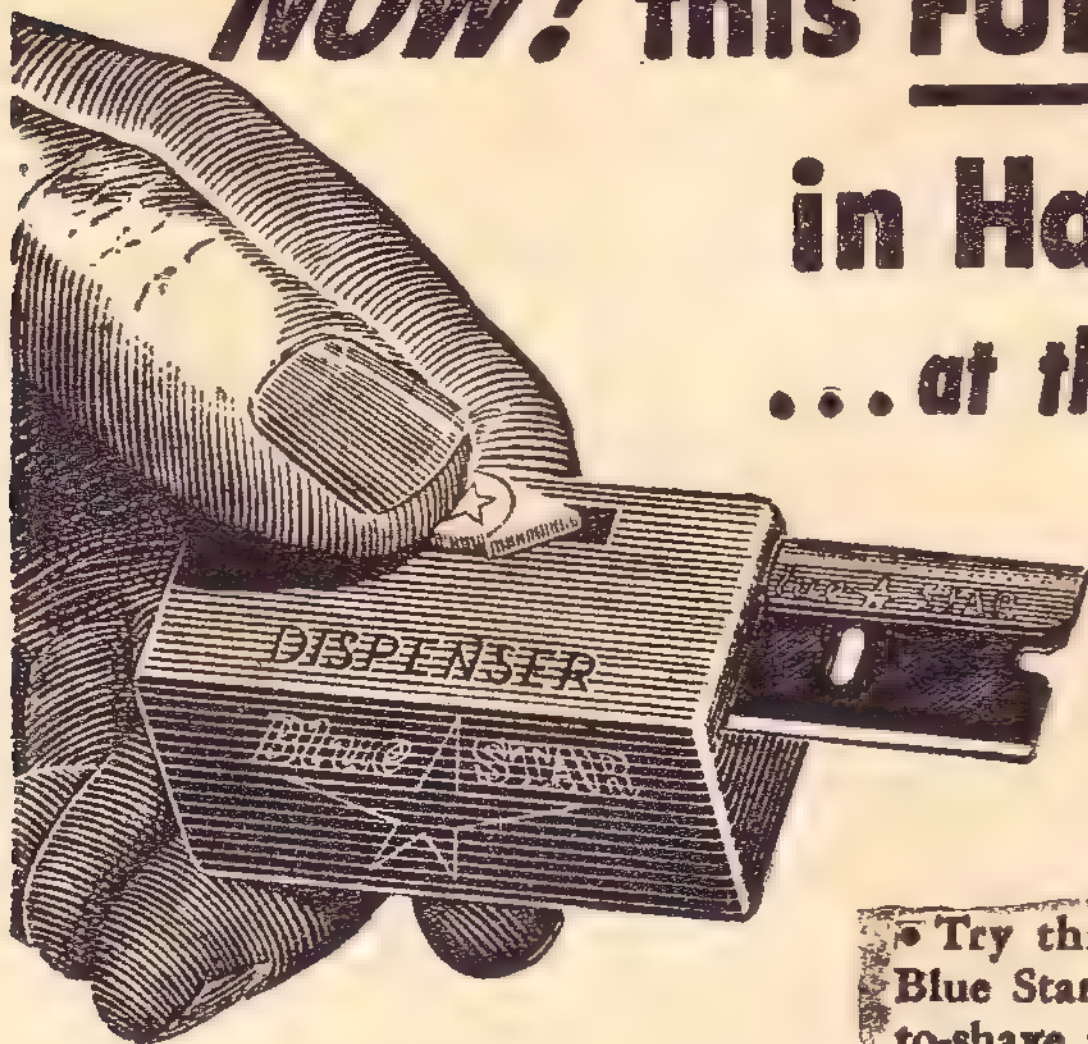
"—say the ride nearly killed old Mrs. Biler but she's a little better this morning."

Families trooped toward the community kitchens with the air of going on picnic. A bald red-faced man in under-

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shirt and trousers smoked his pipe and looked down the street with mild curiosity.

"Human beings," said Hubble, "are adaptable. Thank God for that!"

"But if they're the last? They won't be able to adapt to that."

Hubble shook his head. "No. I'm afraid not."

It was a big square building two blocks off the plaza to which Beitz led them. Inside was a large shadowy hall in which bulked a row of tall square blocks of apparatus.

They were obviously televisor instruments. Each had a square screen, a microphone grating and beneath that a panel of controls, pointer-dials, other less identifiable instruments.

KENNISTON found and opened a service-panel in the back of one. Brief examination of the tangled apparatus inside discouraged him badly.

"They were televisor communication instruments, yes. But the principles on which they worked are baffling. They didn't even use vacuum tubes—they'd apparently got beyond the vacuum tube."

"Could you start one of them transmitting again?"

Kenniston shook his head. "The video system is absolutely beyond me. No resemblance at all to our primitive television apparatus."

Hubble asked, "Would it be possible then to use just the audio system—use one of them as a straight sound-radio transmitter?"

Kenniston hesitated. "That *might* be done. It'd be mostly groping in the dark. But there are some familiar bits of radio design."

He pondered, then said, "The power-leads come from outside. Anything around here that looks like a power-station?"

Old Beitz nodded. "Only a block away. Big shielded atomic turbines of some kind, coupled to generators."

"We might spend years trying to learn how to operate their atomic machinery," Kenniston said.

"We could couple gasoline engines to

these generators," Hubble suggested. "It'd furnish power enough to try one of these transmitters."

Kenniston looked at him. "To call to the other people still left on Earth?"

"Yes. If there *are* any they'd not hear our kind of radio calls. But this is their own communication set-up. They'd hear it."

Kenniston said finally, "All right. Give me power and I'll try."

During the next few days Kenniston was so immersed in the over-mastering fascination of the technical problem set him that he hardly noticed the way in which Middletown's people adapted to New Middletown.

He realized the futility of trying quickly to fathom all the principles of the strange super-radio transmitters. What he tried to do was to deduce the ordinary method of operation, to use it to experiment.

He had power soon. McLain's trucks had brought needed gasoline engines, not only to pump water from the great reservoirs but also to turn at least one of the generators in the power-station.

The trucks brought other things—more food, clothing, furniture, hospital equipment, books. And McLain began to talk of organizing a motor-expedition to explore the surrounding country.

The crews already organized to explore New Middletown itself were searching every block and building. And already they had made two surprising discoveries. Hubble took Kenniston to see one of these. He led down through a chain of corridors and catacombs underneath the city.

"You know that it's a few degrees warmer here in New Middletown than the Sun's heat can account for," Hubble said. "We found big conduits that seemed to bring that slightly warmer air up into the city, so I had the men trace the conduits down to their source."

Kenniston felt sudden excitement. "The source? A big artificial heating plant?"

"No, not that, Hubble said. "But here we are now. Have a look for yourself."

They had suddenly emerged onto a railed gallery in a vast underground chamber. The narrow gallery was the brink of an abysmal pit—a great circular shaft that dropped into unplumbed blackness.

Kenniston stared, puzzled.

He saw that big conduits led upward out of the pit, then diverged in all directions.

"The slightly warmer air comes up from this shaft," Hubble said, nodding toward the pit. He added, "I know it sounds impossible to our engineering experience. But I believe this shaft goes downward many many miles. I believe it goes down into Earth's core."

"But Earth's core is incredibly hot!" Kenniston objected.

"It *was* hot millions of years ago," Hubble corrected. "And as it grew cooler, as the surface grew cold, they built this domed city and maybe others like it—and sank great shafts downward to bring up heat from the core."

"But Earth's core is even cooler now, almost cold. And now there is only a trifle of heat from it to warm the city a little."

"So that's why they couldn't live here any more—it was the Earth-heat that ran out," Kenniston said a little hopelessly.

The second discovery was made by Jennings, a young auto-salesman who headed one of the exploration crews. He brought his discovery to the scientists and Kenniston went with Beitz and Crisci to see it.

It was simply a big semi-circular meeting hall in one of the larger buildings with tiers of several hundred seats.

"A council-room, or lecture-hall, maybe," said Beitz. "But what's unusual about it?"

"Look at those seats in the second tier," said Jennings.

They saw then what he meant. The seats in that tier were not ordinary metal chairs like the others. They were different—different from the chairs, different from each other.

Some of them hardly looked like seats at all.

ONE row of them was very wide and flat and low with high broad backs that flared a little inward. Another row had very narrow seats that had no backs at all. Still others looked a little like curved lounging seats but the curve was an impossibly deep one.

"If they're seats," said Jennings, "they weren't intended for ordinary human people to sit in."

Kenniston and the others looked at each other, startled. He had a sudden grotesque vision of this hall crowded with an audience, an audience partly human and partly—what? Had humanity, in the last ages, shared the Earth with races that were not human?

"We are all jumping at conclusions." Beitz' voice broke the spell. "They may not be seats at all."

But he added to Jennings as they left, "Better not tell the people about this. It might upset them."

What the other exploration-crews had found was summarized in a short speech by Hubble at the big town-meeting of Middletown's people held in the plaza on Sunday afternoon.

There had been church-services that morning—services without bells or organs or stained glass but held in lofty shadowy rooms of cathedral-like solemnity.

The first town-meeting of New Middletown followed. Loud-speakers had been set up so that all in the big plaza might hear.

Mayor Garriss, an older-looking humbled Mayor Garriss, spoke to them. He was stumblingly encouraging. The ration system was working well, he told them. There was no danger of starvation. For hydroponic farming would soon be started. They could live in New Middletown indefinitely if necessary.

"Doctor Hubble," he added, "will tell you of what has been found in New Middletown by the exploring crews."

Hubble was concise. He emphasized first that the people of New Middletown had apparently left it deliberately. "They took their personal belongings, their books, their clothing, their smaller apparatus, instruments and furnish-

ings. What they left were things too massive for easy transportation.

"That includes certain machinery which we think was atomically powered but which must be studied with great care before attempts at operating it can be made. We feel sure that in time study will make it possible to use all such equipment."

Mayor Garris rose to add eagerly, "And at least one piece of equipment is now ready to use! Mr. Kenniston has got one of the radio transmitters here going and will now start calling to contact the other peoples of the Earth."

A great cheering shout rose instantly from the gathered Middletowners. Their excitement was obvious and prolonged.

Kenniston, after the gathering broke up, found himself besieged by eager questioners. Yes, he had the strange radio transmitter ready to use. Yes, they would start calling, right away.

He was worried when he got a moment alone with Hubble. "Garris shouldn't have announced that! These people are dead sure now that we'll be talking to other peopled cities soon!"

Hubble looked worried too. "They're so sure that there *are* other people—that it's only a matter of contacting them."

Kenniston looked at him. "Do you believe there are any others? I don't, Hubble. God knows I'd like to but I can't. If they couldn't live in this city they couldn't anywhere."

"Perhaps," Hubble admitted uneasily. "But we can't be sure of anything. We have to try and keep trying."

Kenniston started the transmitter that night, using it for only ten minutes each hour to conserve gasoline as much as possible.

"Middletown calling!" He spoke into the microphone. "Middletown calling!"

No use of adding more—they could not yet operate a receiver to hear an answer. They could only call to make known their presence, and wait and hope that any others left on dying Earth would hear and come.

Crowds watched from outside the door as he called. They were there

through the night when Beltz took over, there again the next day and the next.

They were quite silent but the hope in their faces made Kenniston sick. He felt, as another day and another passed, the mockery of the words he kept repeating.

"Middletown calling!"

Calling what? An Earth dying, devoid of human life, a cold and arid sphere that had done with humanity long ago?

Yet he had to keep sending it out, the cry of man lost in the ages and seeking his kind, the cry that he felt there were no ears on Earth to hear.

"Middletown calling—calling—"

CHAPTER VI

Out of the Silence

NO answer. Weeks had gone by while Kenniston and Beitz called and called and out of the silence of dying Earth had come no reply. Every hour they had spoken the words that had become meaningless. And between calls they had fumbled with the strange receivers that they did not yet know how to tune.

Kenniston came to dread the time when he must leave the building and walk through the little crowd of hopeful Middletowners who were always gathered outside.

"No, not yet," he had to say, always trying to look confident. "But maybe soon—"

"And maybe never," he told Carol when they were alone. "If anybody had heard they could have got here from any part of Earth in these weeks we've been calling."

"Perhaps they don't have airplanes," she reminded.

"If they had complicated radio-receivers to hear our call they'd have planes too, wouldn't they?"

His logic was unanswerable. For a moment Carol was silent. Then, "Please don't say that to anyone else, Ken. All

these people—it's what keeps them going, I think, their hope of finding other people. They wouldn't feel so lost.

"We'll just keep calling," he said. "It's all we can do. Maybe McLain and Crisci will find someone out there. They should be back soon."

McLain had succeeded in organizing his motor-expedition to explore the surrounding country. It had taken weeks of preparation, of marshalling tank-trucks from Middletown to use as gasoline-caches at carefully selected points, of laying out tentative routes to follow. Two weeks before the little caravan of jeeps and half-tracks had started out and its return was now due.

And as it searched the dusty wastes out there, as Kenniston and Beitz again and again voiced the unanswered call, work and life and death had marched forward in New Middletown.

Hubble had helped lay out the schedule of necessary work. The hydroponic tanks had to be got ready. The whole city had to be cleaned of drifted dust. The supplies in old Middletown had to be inventoried and prepared for transport to the new city.

A board of elected officials had assigned men to their work. Every man had his job, his schedule of hours, his pay in ration-tickets. The schools had been set up again. Courts and law functioned once more.

The first baby of New Middletown had been born less than an hour after the march from the old city. Babies continued to be born each day. And death had come quickly too, its first victims among the old who could not stand the shock of uprooting. A cemetery had been established in one of the big parks.

But underneath all the bustle of new activities it was a waiting city—a city, waiting with terrible eagerness for an answer to that call that went hourly out into the unreplying silence.

Kenniston felt his helplessness. He could not even understand completely the transmitters he used. He had, in these weeks, completely disassembled one of them without being able to puzzle out its circuits.

He was sure that it employed radio frequencies far outside the electromagnetic spectrum of 20th century science. But parts of the design were baffling. The words stamped on the apparatus meant nothing—they were in the same completely unknown language as all the city's inscriptions.

He could only keep sending out the same questioning hopeful message into the unknown.

"Middletown calling!"

Finally McLain's exploring expedition returned. Carol came running to Kenniston with the news. He went with her to the portal, where thousands of Middletowners were already anxiously gathering.

"They've had a hard time," said Kenniston as the jeeps and half-tracks rolled through the portal and came to a halt.

McLain, Crisci and the others were unshaven, dust-smearred, exhausted-looking. Some of them sagged in their seats.

McLain's voice boomed to the eager questioners. "Tell you all about it later! Right now we're pretty beat up."

Crisci's tired voice cut in. "Why not tell them now? They'll have to know."

He faced the wondering crowd and said, "We found something, yes. We found a city two hundred miles west of here—a domed city, just like New Middletown and almost as big."

Bertram Garriss asked the question that was in everyone's mind. "Well? Were there people in that other city?"

Crisci's voice dropped to a softness. "No. There was nobody there—not a soul. It was dead and it had been dead a long time."

McLain added, "It's true. We saw no sign of life anywhere except a few little animals on the plains."

Carol turned a pale face toward Kenniston. "Then there's no one else? Then we're the last?"

A sick silence had fallen on the crowd. They looked at each other numbly. Bertram Garriss displayed unsuspected capacities of leadership. He got up on one of the half-tracks and spoke cheerfully.

"Now, folks, no use to let this news get you down! McLain's party only covered a few hundred miles and Earth is a mighty big place! Remember that Mr. Kenniston's radio-calls are going out every hour."

He rattled on loudly. "We've all been working hard and we need some recreation. So tonight we're going to have a big get-together in the plaza—a town party. Tell everybody to come!"

The crowd of Middletowners brightened a little. But as they went away Kenniston saw that most of them still looked back soberly. He told Garris, "It was a good idea to take their minds off things."

The Mayor looked pleased. "Sure. They're just too impatient. They don't realize it may take the other people a good while to answer those calls of yours."

Kenniston realized that Garris' confidence had not been assumed. Despite the shattering new revelation, the Mayor still had faith that there were other people.

BUT Hubble was somber when he heard the news. "Another dead city? Then there's no further doubt in my mind. Earth must be lifeless."

"Shall I keep sending out the radio-call?"

Hubble hesitated. "Yes, Ken—for awhile. We don't want to spoil their party tonight."

The town party in the plaza that night had the unusual luxury of electric lights, powered by a portable generator. There was a swing band on a platform and a big space had been roped off for dancing.

Kenniston threaded through the crowd with Carol for Beitz had offered to stand his trick. Everyone knew him now and greeted him but he noticed a significant difference in their greetings. They didn't ask him now whether his calls had had an answer. They all avoided that topic. "They're giving up hope," he said to Carol. "They're afraid there are no other people and they don't want to think about it."

Yet the party went well until Mayor Garris blundered. He had been cheerily backslapping his way through the crowd all evening, admiring babies, exchanging familiar greetings, obviously enjoying this relapse into the arts of politicians.

Flushed and happy he got up on the band platform and called through the loudspeaker to the crowd. "Come on, folks, how about a little community singing? I'll lead you with my famous tenor. How about 'Let Me Call You Sweetheart'?"

They laughed and sang as the band struck up the tune and the pudgy Mayor cheerfully waved his hand like a conductor. The old songs not heard on Earth for millions of years echoed off the tall white buildings and the great shimmering dome overhead.

But as they sang such songs as "Banks of the Wabash" and "My Old Kentucky Home," voices and faces lost their brightness. Kenniston saw the haunting yearning that came into the gathered thousands of faces and the mistiness in Carol's eyes.

The swell of voices dropped a little. The singers seemed to hesitate. And then with an hysterical cry a woman in the crowd sank sobbing to the ground. The singing and music stopped dead and there was nothing but the racking sobs of the woman whom a man vainly tried to comfort.

Kenniston heard her crying out, "It's all gone forever—our whole world and all its people! There's only us on this dead world!"

"Let's not get downhearted, folks!" pleaded the Mayor but it was too late for that. The spell was broken. The people of Middletown at last confronted their awful aloneness.

The party was over. The crowd silently dispersed, not speaking to each other, each man going back to his own home, his own thoughts. Kenniston tried to find words of comfort for Carol when he left but could not. She had to face this. They all had to face it, the certainty that they were the last on Earth.

He walked slowly back through the

silent empty streets to relieve Beitz. The Moon had risen now and through the great dome it poured coppery light upon the empty plaza.

Kenniston stopped and turned as he heard a voice and running feet pursuing him. "Hey! Hey, Mr. Kenniston!"

He recognized Bud Martin, who had owned the garage in old Middletown. Bud's lean young face was excited.

"Mr. Kenniston, I thought I just saw a plane going over the dome high up! Only it looked more like a big submarine than a plane!"

Kenniston thought that he might have expected this. In their reaction of bitter disappointment many of the Middletowners might be expected now to "see" the other people they so longed to see.

But he said, "I didn't hear anything, Bud."

"Neither did I! It went quiet and fast, high up there. I just got a glimpse of it."

Kenniston looked up with him. They stared for moments but the moonlit sky was coldly empty. He lowered his gaze. "It must have been a cloud-shadow, Bud. There's nothing there."

Bud Martin swore, then said earnestly, "Listen, Mr. Kenniston, I'm not a hysterical woman. I *saw* something."

It gave Kenniston pause. For a moment, his heart quickened. Was it possible—?

He stared again, for minutes. But the sky remained empty. Yet his throb of excitement persisted. He said abruptly, "We'll get Hubble. But don't say anything to anyone else. Stirring up false hopes now would be disastrous."

Hubble was with McLain and Crisci in a candlelit room, listening to their account of that other dead city they had found. He listened to Bud Martin's eager tale and then looked at Kenniston.

"I saw nothing," Kenniston admitted. "But through the dome anything would be hard to see except when it was dead overhead."

Hubble rose. "Perhaps we'd better have a look from outside. Get your coats on."

Heavily wrapped they five went along

the silent streets to the portal and through it into the outer night. They walked a hundred yards out from the portal, along the sand-drifted highway, then stopped and scanned the sky.

The cold was intense. The big Moon shone with a hard coppery brilliance that washed the looming dome of New Middletown with light. Kenniston's gaze swept the blazing chains of stars. The old groups were distorted. But some were not much changed. Still the Great Bear warded the north and still the mighty suns of the Lyre held true to their ancient comradeship.

And individual stars still burned in unmistakable splendor—the blue-white flaring beacon of Vega, the somber, smoky red magnificence of Antares, the throbbing gold of Altair.

"People are going to be seeing plenty of things," McLain said skeptically. "We might as well—"

"Listen!" said Hubble, holding up his hand.

Kenniston heard only the whisper of bitter wind. Then, faintly, a thrumming that rose and fell and rose again. "It's from the north," Crisci said suddenly. "And it's coming back around toward us."

ALL five of them were suddenly rigid, held in the grip of an emotion too big for utterance as they peered at the starry sky. The thrumming deepened.

"That's no plane motor!" McLain exclaimed.

It wasn't, Kenniston knew. It was neither the staccato roar of combustion engines nor the scream of jets but a deep bass humming that seemed to fill all the sky. He was aware that his heart was pounding.

Crisci suddenly shouted and pointed. They saw it almost at once, an elongated black mass cutting rapidly down across the stars.

"It's coming right down on us!" yelled Bud Martin.

The thing, in a heartbeat, had become an elongated black bulk rushing down upon them, looming like a thundercloud.

They ran back toward the portal, their feet slipping on the loose sand.

"Look!" cried Crisci. "Look at it!"

They turned, there at the portal. And Kenniston saw now that the downward rush of the black visitant upon them had been only an illusion born of its bigness.

For the thing, humming like a million tops, was settling upon the plain a half-mile from New Middletown. Sand spumed up wildly to veil the great bulk, then fell away and disclosed it resting on the plain.

It was, Kenniston saw instantly, a ship. Bud Martin's description had been accurate. The thing looked for all the world like a giant submarine without a conning-tower that had come down out of the sky to land upon the plain. The deep bass thrumming had stopped. The thing lay there in the moonlight, big, dark, silent. They stared rigidly.

"A ship from another world?" Kenniston whispered. "A spaceship?"

"It must be. But there were no rocket-jets. It uses some other kind of power."

"Why don't they come out of it, now they've landed?"

"What did they come here for? *Who are they?*"

The bulky enigma out there brooded silent, unchanged. Then Kenniston heard a calling of voices, a rising uproar in the city behind them.

Others had seen and called the news. The uproar of voices and running feet increased—all the thousands in New Middletown were beginning to stream in wild excitement toward the portal.

Mayor Garris' pudgy figure ran toward them. "Have they really come? Have the other people come?"

Hubble's voice crackled. "Keep the people back! They mustn't go outside yet. Something has come, we don't know what. Until we do know we've got to be careful."

Into Kenniston's mind suddenly flashed remembrance of that big meeting-hall Jennings had found with its special section of queer seats that no ordinary human man or woman could have used.

He felt a chill along his nerves. What

manner of beings were in the looming, monstrous mass out there?

Garris sounded a little scared. "Why—why, I never thought that if people came they might be enemies."

He started to shout to the police and the National Guardsmen already on hand. "Get those people back! And get your guns!"

Presently the crowd had been forced back into adjacent streets. A score of armed police and Guardsmen waited with Hubble and Kenniston and the others just inside the portal.

The Mayor, his teeth chattering in the cold, said, "Shall we go out to them?"

Hubble shook his head. "No, we're not sure of anything. We'll wait."

They waited, shivering in the cold wind, and as they waited Kenniston's mind rioted with speculation. This great vessel from outer space—whence had it come to dying Earth? From neighbor planets? From the farther stars? *Why* had it come?

And what was going on inside it now? What eyes were watching them?

They waited. All New Middletown waited and watched as the Moon swung its lordly way across the zenith and the stars shifted and the cold deepened.

And nothing happened. The monster metal bulk out there lay lightless and without sound.

The stars dimmed. Bleak gray light crept up the eastern sky. To Kenniston, chafing half-frozen hands, the mighty vessel out on the plain seemed unreal and dreamlike.

McLain swore. "If they're not coming to see us we might as well go out to see them."

"Wait," said Hubble.

"But we've waited for hours and—"

"Wait," said Hubble, again. "They're coming now."

Kenniston saw. A dark opening had appeared, low in the side of the distant mighty hull.

Figures that were vaguely unreal in the dawn light were emerging from that opening and moving slowly toward New Middletown.

CHAPTER VII

Strangers from the Stars

KENNISTON watched them come—the four vague figures walking slowly through the dawn toward New Middletown. His heart pounded and his mouth was dry and he was strangely afraid.

Perhaps it was the manner of their coming that made him so. The brooding enigmatic bulk of that unknown ship, that long and cautious silence—it came to him that they too were doubtful.

The three leading figures resolved themselves gradually into men, clad in slacks and jackets against the biting cold. The fourth member of the party trudged along some distance behind them, a stocky form veiled in the billowing dust.

Mayor Garris said, wonderingly, "They look just like us. I guess people haven't changed much after all in a billion years."

Kenniston nodded. For some reason the cold knot in the pit of his stomach would not relax. There was something overpowering in this incredible meeting of two epochs.

He glanced at the others. Their faces were white and tense. There was a feeling of excitement verging almost upon hysteria.

The strangers were close enough now to distinguish features. The stocky laggard remained indistinct but of the three who came before, Kenniston saw now that only two were men. The third was a girl, tall and lithe, with smooth-coiled hair as shining as pale gold.

Kenniston had seen more beautiful women but never one who was so forcefully vital. Her blue eyes were brilliant, every line of her face keenly alert, her mouth faintly imperious with authority. Somehow she made him instantly conscious of vast horizons of knowledge and experience which were far beyond his own ken.

The younger of the two men was

broad and hard with sorrel hair and a pair of rather chilly eyes that did not give much away. A proud strong man, Kenniston thought, but not a satisfied one. It was a type he knew and did not care for.

The other man was thin and untidy and very human. He had none of the cool reserve of his companions. He was excited and showed it, blinked eagerly at the Middletowners. Kenniston warmed to him at once.

There was a strange silence and the girl and two men stopped. They looked at the Middletowners and the Middletowners stared at them.

Then the girl said something to her companions in a rapid unfamiliar tongue. The younger man nodded silently and the thin eager man poured out a tumbling flood of words.

Mayor Garris stepped forward hesitantly, a paradox of pompous humility. "I—" he said, and stopped. The small word vanished away on the wind, and he could seem to find nothing to replace it. The blond girl regarded him with a cool gaze, intent and faintly amused.

The thin man stepped forward toward them. Forming the words very carefully, he said, "Middletown calling." And again, "Middletown—calling!"

Kenniston was shaken by a great amazement. Relief and understanding made him almost giddy for the moment, and he heard again his own tired voice, speaking those two hopeless pleading words into a silence that neither heard nor answered.

But it *had* heard. It had answered from somewhere. *From where? Another world, another star? Not from anywhere on Earth, surely. That great ship had never stooped to make such a paltry journey.*

He heard Mayor Garris utter a squeaking, strangled cry. A wave of shock, audible in the indrawn breath of every man there, swept the tight-packed group.

Kenniston's wandering thoughts came back with a start.

The fourth member of the party had come up and joined the other three. And

Kenniston himself felt shock as he saw. The fourth of the newcomers was not human. Manlike, yes—but not a man.

He was tall, his body enormously strong and massive, his thick arms ending in hands like heavy paws. He was clothed in his own shaggy fur, supplemented by a harnesslike garment. His head was flattened, its muzzle protruding in the fashion of a beast, his round and tufted ears alert. And his eyes . . .

It was the eyes that were most shocking. The eyes that met Kenniston's, were large and dark and full of quick, penetrating intelligence. Good-natured eyes, curious, smiling.

The Mayor had backed away. His face was quite white. He cried out shrilly, "Why, it isn't *human*!"

The furry one looked puzzled by this outburst. He glanced at the girl and the two men and they all looked at Garris, frowning, as though at a loss to understand his fright.

The creature moved toward Garris a step or two, his pawlike hands outstretched. He spoke in a slow, rumbling voice and smiled, showing a row of great teeth that glistened sharp as sabres in the light.

Garris shrieked. And Kenniston saw panic on the faces of the other men, saw the guns come up.

"Wait!" he yelled and darted forward, thrusting the Mayor aside. "For God's sake wait, you fools!" He faced them, standing so that his body shielded the alien one.

He still had, himself, a revulsion from that creature that was both beastlike and manlike. But the furry one had looked at him and had smiled.

"Don't shoot!" he cried. "It's intelligent, it's one of them—"

"Stand aside, Kenniston!" shouted the Mayor, his voice high with panic. "The brute looks dangerous!"

The guns he faced swung sharply away from Kenniston. He turned and saw that the four newcomers had suddenly stepped a little to one side.

ABRUPTLY, the scene ended. The girl raised her hand in a swift ges-

ture. From the ship out on the plain came a flash of white light.

It struck like a snake at all of the crowd of Middletowners in the portal. It struck and was gone in an instant.

Kenniston had been in its path too. He felt a stunning shock in every nerve of his body. There was only a split-second of pain, then a numbed paralysis as from an electric shock.

He saw Garris and Hubble and the others stagger, their faces white and shaken. The guns dropped from nerveless hands. Then the furry one trudged toward Kenniston. Again his dark eyes smile. He made reassuring rumbling sounds and his big pawlike hands kneaded into Kenniston's neck with expert deftness.

The paralysis of Kenniston's nerves began to fade. The sorrel-haired younger man had stepped forward and picked up one of the fallen guns. Incredulity came into his eyes as he examined it. He said something in a sharp voice to the others.

They looked the gun over and over. Then, puzzled and startled, they stared at Kenniston and at the other Middletowners, who now seemed returning to normal.

"They've got a death-ray or something!" choked Bertram Garris. "They can kill us!"

Hubble said savagely, "Shut up. You're making an ass of yourself. That weapon was only a non-lethal means of defense that you forced them to use."

The girl called excitedly to the furry one. "Gorr Holl!"

It was, obviously, his name. And Gorr Holl rejoined the other three. He too uttered sounds of bewilderment as he looked at the gun.

Kenniston spoke to Hubble, ignoring Garris and the dazed police. "I think they've just begun to suspect where we came from."

The excitement of the four newcomers was obvious. It was the girl, Kenniston noticed, who first recovered from bewilderment. She spoke quickly to the thin blinking man, the one who had so happily repeated, "Middletown calling!"

From her repeated use of the name Kenniston guessed the man was called Piers Eglin.

Piers Eglin looked the most staggered of all the four—and the most joyful. He came back to Kenniston. He almost devoured him with those blinking eyes.

"Middletown," he said. And then, after a moment, "Friends."

Kenniston seized on that. "Friends? Then you speak English?"

The word "English" set Piers Eglin off into a new paroxysm of excitement. He began to babble to the others but the girl cut him short.

HE swung back to Kenniston. "English—language," he almost panted. "You—speak—English-language."

Kenniston simply nodded.

A look of awe crept into Piers Eglin's blinking eyes as he asked, "Who—? No!" He began again. "Where—do you—come from?"

"From the past," Kenniston answered and felt the full unreality of it as he said it. "From far in the past."

"How far?"

Kenniston realized that 20th-century dates would mean little, after all these epochs. He thought a moment, then said, "Very far in the past. In our lifetime atomic power was first released."

"So far?" whispered Piers Eglin numbly. "But how? *How?*"

Kenniston shrugged helplessly and continued, "There was an atomic explosion over our city. We found our whole city in this age. That's all."

The thin man feverishly translated for the others. The girl showed deep interest. But it was Gorr Holl, the furry one, who made the longest comment in his rumbling voice.

Piers Eglin swung back to Kenniston. But Kenniston stemmed the other's eager questions by a question of his own. "Where do *you* come from?"

The thin one pointed up at the dawn-lit sky. "From—" he seemed trying to remember the ancient name. Then, "From Vega."

It was Kenniston's turn to be staggered. "But you're Earthmen!" He

pointed to Gorr Holl's furry figure. "And what about him?"

Again, Piers Eglin seemed to search his memory for a name. Then he said it. "Capella. Gorr Holl is from Capella."

There was a silence in which the four looked at the men of Middletown. Kenniston's mind was a chaotic whirl.

The girl broke the spell. She was shivering a little and she now spoke in a low, rapid voice.

Piers Eglin told them, "She is Varn Allan, the Administrator of this sector. He"—nodding to the sorrel-haired younger man—"is Norden Lund, the Sub-Administrator."

He added, "She asks that we talk inside the city, where it is not so cold."

Kenniston had guessed that the girl held authority in the group. He was not surprised. Her vibrant forcefulness was striking.

They started through the portal. Mayor Garris skipped hastily ahead with a nervous glance back at Gorr Holl's towering figure. But even in his present bewilderment, Bertram Garris could not resist the opportunity offered by the great crowd of Middletowners waiting inside the portal. He raised his voice loudly.

"Everything's fine, folks! The other people have finally come! They're a little strange in some ways but they're here!"

His rhetoric was drowned by the great cheer that rose from the Middletowners crowded along the streets. But that cheer subsided momentarily as the crowd saw Gorr Holl trudging along with the other three. They stared incredulously at the big furry Capellan.

"What is it? A pet?"

"It's one of *them*! The Mayor said so! But—"

Then, from the crowd along the street, a tiny girl toddled directly into their path.

Her eyes shining with childish glee, she ran toward Gorr Holl's mighty furry form. "Teddy bear!" she shrieked joyfully. "*Teddy bear!*"

Gorr Holl uttered a rumbling laugh, and reached down his great paw to pat her head.

OTHER children came running, breaking away from fearful mothers, clustering eagerly around the big Capellan as he trudged along. The momentary tension of the crowd relaxed and they grinned at each other and laughed and cheered the newcomers.

Kenniston heard that cheering following them all the way through the streets as the Middletowners quickly gathered. And it held, he knew, all the half-hysterical joy and relief they felt—the joy and relief of Middletown's thousands at being no longer alone on a dying world, at seeing help and hope and companionship come to them at last.

"There they are—the other people! I knew there must be some of them somewhere!"

"It took 'em long enough to get here but am I glad to see them! Things'll be different now!"

The cheering joyful crowd surged after them all the way to the big building that was now City Hall, and massed to wait outside it.

Inside Kenniston and Hubble and the Mayor and City Council seated themselves with the four strangers around a massive metal table.

Kenniston felt the unreality of it—these four from the stars, sitting across from the City Council of poky old Middletown! Borchard, the coal-dealer, and Moretti, the wholesale produce merchant, and—

Bertram Garris was speaking in an uncertain attempt at oratory. "Unparalleled historic event—mutual co-operation—new era—"

The girl Varn Allan sat regarding the pudgy gesturing Mayor with searching blue eyes. When he had finished she spoke questioningly to Gorr Holl. The big furry Capellan answered excitedly and at length.

Piers Eglin listened, then addressed Kenniston and the others in his halting pedantic English.

"We cannot doubt your story! Such people as you—such clothing, weapons, vehicles—cannot but come from the far past. Gorr Holl says that by electronic theory it is possible for such an atomic

explosion to hurl matter forward along its world-line, though it is a freak thing that might occur but once in eons."

Kenniston felt a wonderment. That great furry creature called Gorr Holl discussing abstruse atomic theory?

Piers Eglin was speaking on. "We didn't dream of such a possibility when we were sent to investigate the signals from Earth. No one has lived on this planet for thousands of years."

Two things flashed across Kenniston's mind—first that the televisior-radio of this domed city had indeed been far outside his comprehension. That radio had been designed for *interstellar* distances. And second that astonishing assertion that no one had lived on Earth for thousands of years.

"You mean that Earth has been lifeless that long?" he cried. "But you—you speak our old language!"

Piers Eglin eagerly explained. "I'm an historian, specializing in the pre-Atomic civilization of Earth. I had to learn its language, from the old writing and speech-records still preserved. It's why I asked leave to accompany this party."

"But *why* is Earth lifeless? What happened to its peoples in these ages that have passed?"

The other told him, "Earth's people in those ages spread out to other worlds. Not so much to the other planets of this System—the outer ones were cold, and watery Venus had too tiny a land-surface. But to the worlds of other stars, across the galaxy.

"But as time went on Earth itself grew so cold that even in these domed cities life was difficult. So the Board of Governors evacuated the remaining people of Earth to other, warmer star-worlds."

He added to Kenniston, "It's lucky your signals were heard. For now you have nothing to worry about. You'll soon be evacuated too."

"Evacuated?" Kenniston exclaimed. "What do you mean?"

Piers Eglin said, "I mean, evacuated from Earth. All you people will be moved out to one of the star-worlds as soon as possible."

Kenniston was so astounded by that casual statement that for the moment he could not speak.

Hubble and the other Middletowners looked equally startled. But Mayor Garris was the one who first found his tongue. He rose to his pudgy height and stared at the four from the stars.

"Do I understand"—even now, Bertram Garris could not express himself without oratory—"do I understand you to suggest that we Middletowners leave *Earth*?"

The thin Vegan blinked at him, surprised by his vehemence. "Why of course. It won't take long to bring enough star-ships here to transport all your people."

Varn Allan's cool voice spoke in that unfamiliar language. Piers Eglin listened carefully, then translated for the others.

"Varn says that since you're not conditioned to any world but Earth you'll be assigned to some warm planet as much like Earth as possible."

"That," said Kenniston ironically, "is very decent of her."

The girl's blue eyes flashed at him. She might not have understood his words but she had detected the resentment in his tone. Frowning a little she gazed quickly around the Middletowners' faces.

Those faces were stunned, bewildered. Borchard, the coal-dealer, had risen angrily to his feet. "Is *that* the only kind of help these other people have for us?"

Mayor Garris for once forgot his oratory in his indignation. He almost sputtered as he told Piers Eglin, "If you

think we are going to move clear off the Earth to some crazy place way out in the sky you're badly mistaken!"

CHAPTER VIII

Disastrous Decision

PIERS EGLIN looked badly upset. And though Varn Allen and Lund and big furry Gorr Holl had not understood, they detected their companion's bewilderment and leaned forward intently.

"But surely," cried Piers Eglin, "you don't *want* to stay in the cold and hardship of this dying world?"

Kenniston, watching the anger and the instinctive basic fear grow still stronger in the Mayor's white face, could understand his feelings. His own reaction was the same.

"Leave Earth?" said Garris, forcing the words out painfully from a throat constricted with emotion. "Leave it? Listen, you people! We have left our own time. We have had to leave our own city, our homes. That's enough. It's all we can stand in one lifetime. Leave our own world? No!"

There was no oratory about him now. He was like a man who has been asked to die. Kenniston spoke to Piers Eglin. His own voice was not quite steady.

"Try to make them understand. We are Earthborn. Our whole life, all the generations before us since the beginning—"

[Turn page]

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He could not put it into words, this sudden passionate oneness with Earth.

The Earth hath He given to the children of men . . .

The Earth, the soil, the winds and the rain, the growth and the dying over the ages, beast and tree and man. You could not forget that. You could not let drop the heritage of a world as though it had never been.

The sorrel-haired Norden Lund was speaking to Varn Allan in a hard impatient voice, looking contemptuously at the Middletowners.

"Lund says that such objections are worthy of aboriginals and that it is evident that your culture level is primitive."

The girl, her blue eyes troubled, addressed Piers Eglin. "Varn Allan begs that you do not let emotion stand in the way of facts. Life here is impossible and therefore you must go."

"Let her tell that to the people," said the Mayor in an oddly tight voice. "No. I'll tell them myself."

He rose and left the council room. There was a curious dignity about him now. Borchard and Moretti followed. They too showed a shrinking instinctive dread of the thing that had been proposed.

Varn Allan shrugged and rose. With Kenniston and the others the star-folk followed the Mayor of Middletown.

They were gathered outside in the plaza, all the thousands of Middletown—mill-hand, housewife, banker and bookkeeper, the old men and the little children. They were happy.

They cheered, sending up a great joyous shout to echo from the towers, and Kenniston knew that they were thinking, *It'll be all right now. They'll give us a hand, these strangers, and we'll make everything here right again!*

Mayor Garris took the microphone of the loudspeaker system. "Folks, listen carefully! These new people are telling us that we ought to leave Earth. They say they'll give us a better world somewhere out there among the stars. Do you want to go—away from Earth?"

There was a long moment of utter si-

lence in which Kenniston saw the Middletowners' faces grow bewildered, incredulous. He looked at Varn Allan's face and saw bewilderment and troubled worry there too. Two epochs, two utterly different ways of life were meeting here and finding it difficult to understand each other.

WHEN finally the crowd of Middletowners had grasped the suggestion their answer came as a rising chorus of exclamations.

"Go off and live someplace in the sky? It's a crazy idea!"

"It was bad enough to leave Middletown for this place! But to leave Earth altogether—no!"

A large-handed stocky man who looked like a truckdriver came to the steps and spoke up to the Mayor. "I thought these strangers were going to help us! Is that the only help they've got to offer—a wacky suggestion like that?"

"They just don't understand us yet or they wouldn't have proposed it," the Mayor assured. He turned to the star-folk. "You see? My people wouldn't listen to an idea like that for a minute!"

Piers Eglin and the others conversed rapidly. The sorrel-haired Lund talked curtly, eyeing the Middletowners with contemptuous impatience. But the trouble in the girl's face deepened as she finally spoke.

"Varn Allan says that she regrets your attitude. Nevertheless, for your own good, she must recommend immediate evacuation to the Board of Governors."

Mayor Garris snorted. "Her recommendations will have no effect on us. We don't recognize any authority but our own government."

Eglin looked appalled. "But nobody defies the Governors! They are the executive body of the whole Federation of Stars."

"Let them govern the stars then! What we need is help, not orders!" Garris' anger was growing to a dangerous pitch.

Kenniston had listened with mounting uneasiness. He divined what the

Mayor's narrowness had missed—a vast and powerful machinery of government directing this future universe, a machinery of which the big star-ship and its occupants were but a symbol.

He resented the obvious contempt of Norden Lund. But he sensed that the brilliant girl official was not so much unsympathetic to the Middletowners as she was baffled by their psychology. He seized the chance offered by the Mayor's last words to intervene hastily.

"We *could* use help right away," he told Piers Eglin. "We need power and our fuel is running low. If you could start up some of the atomic generators here it'd be a terrific help."

Again the blinking historian consulted Varn Allan. The doubt and trouble in her face deepened but she finally nodded.

Eglin told Kenniston, "She says there's no objection to helping you to be more comfortable while you're here. The crew of the *Thanis* will help—they'll work under Gorr Holl, our chief atomic technician."

The Mayor gasped. "That furry brute a *technician*?"

Piers Eglin cleared his throat. "There will—ah—be others among the crew who will be unfamiliar in race to you. Perhaps you had better—ah—assure your people that they too are friends."

Garris nodded. "I'll attend to that."

"I will act as interpreter. And now there is much to be done. We will return shortly with the crew and necessary tools and supplies."

Kenniston stepped aside to give them room. Varn Allan's blue eyes met his in a searching questioning look as she went down the steps. Lund glanced at him without friendliness as he followed with Eglin and big Gorr Holl. The crowd of Middletowners parted to let them pass through, looking after them with eager interest.

Then the Mayor stepped to the microphone. He gave the news to the crowd—power, more water, more lights, perhaps even heat. And while they were cheering that, Hubble turned thoughtfully to Kenniston.

"Ken, there's going to be trouble if those people stick to their idea of evacuating us away from Earth."

Kenniston nodded, worriedly. "Such evacuation of a world is probably commonplace to them. But they'll never get the Middletowners to listen to it. Leave Earth? Lots of these people haven't even been up in a plane!"

He watched the crowd disperse and even the thought that soon the big generators would be humming again could not dispel his worry.

That heavy foreboding remained with him through the days that followed. They were full hard-driven days and he worked early and late. But even so that premonition of an ultimate clash of two irreconcilable cultures would not leave his mind.

Varn Allan had not come back to New Middletown and that added to Kenniston's uneasiness. He wished that he could talk to her and make her understand the deep instinct of his people from the past. But the crew of the *Thanis* had come full force into New Middletown the afternoon of that first day.

Two score of them—a hard-handed, alert capable breed no different from all the sailors Kenniston had ever seen, though their seas were the incalculable deeps of outer space and their faces were darkened by the rays of alien suns. Across the blowing dust of this world that had bred and lost them they came and with them were the others Piers Eglin had spoken of—the strange children of other stars.

One was big and bulky, walking stodgily on massive legs. His wrinkled gray skin hung in heavy folds. His face was broad and flat and featureless with little wise old eyes.

Two were lean and dark, moving like conspirators wrapped in black cloaks. Their narrow heads were hairless and their glance was bright and full of mad-cap humor. Kenniston realized with a shock that the cloaks they wore were wings, folded close around their bodies.

There was another, who had a peculiar gliding grace that hinted of un-

guessed strength and speed and whose bearing was very cool and proud. He was handsome, with a mane of snow-white fur sweeping back from his brow, and there was only a faint touch of cruelty in his broad cheekbones and straight, smiling mouth.

These four and Gorr Holl—manlike but not men, children of far worlds, walking with easy confidence on old Earth.

The folk of Middletown received them with stares and whispers, a shrinking that was half fearful and half ignorant racial resentment. It was difficult at first to accept the fact that such non-human people existed at all. Much more difficult to accept them as equals.

But not to Middletown's children. They ignored the bronzed space-men and clustered in droves around the non-humans. These were creatures out of fairy tales come alive and the children loved them.

Kenniston himself had felt that first uneasy shrinking. It was incredible to him that he must work beside these weird beings. His flesh crept when one came near him. Surely they could not behave as men!

He changed his mind that first day.

For in a big room of dusty atomic generators Gorr Holl changed abruptly from a shambling good-natured creature into a highly efficient technician. He operated hidden catches and had a shield-panel off one of the big mechanisms before Kenniston saw how he did it.

He drew a flat pocket-flash from a pouch on his harness and used it for light as he poked his hairy bullet-head inside the machine. His low rumbling comments came out of the bowels of the generator.

GORR HOLL finally withdrew his head from the machine and spoke disgustedly. Eglin translated.

"He says this old installation is badly designed and in poor condition. He says he would like to get his hands on the technician who would do a job like this."

Kenniston laughed. The big furry Capellan sounded like a blood-brother to every repair-technician of old Earth.

"He says the whole thing ought to be junked but he'll try to get it going."

And he did. Bellowing orders, thundering deep-chested Capellan profanity, attacking the generator as though it were a personal enemy, Gorr Holl drove his crew of hard-handed spacemen into performing miracles.

Kenniston forgot all sense of strangeness in the intense technical interest of following the work. Laboring as he could, eating and sleeping with these star-worlders through the long hard days and nights, he began to pick up the language with amazing speed. Piers Eglin was eager to help him and after Kenniston discovered that the basic structure of the tongue was that of his own English things went more easily.

He discovered one day that he was working beside the non-humans as naturally as though he had always done it. It no longer seemed strange that Magro, the handsome white-furred Spican, was an electronics expert whose easy unerring work left Kenniston staring.

The brothers, Ban and Bal, were masters at refitting. Kenniston envied their deftness with outworn parts, the swift ease with which their wiry bodies flitted batlike among the upper levels of the towering machines, where it was hard for men to go.

And Lal'lor, the old gray stodgy one of the massive body, who spoke little but saw much from wise little eyes, had an amazing mathematical genius. Kenniston discovered it when Lal'lor went with him and Hubble and Piers Eglin to look at the big heat-shaft that seemed to go down to the bowels of Earth.

The historian nodded comprehendingly as he looked at the great shaft and its conduits. It descended, he said, to Earth's inmost core.

"It was a great work. It and others like it, in these domed cities, kept Earth habitable ages longer than would otherwise have been the case. But there is no more heat in Earth's core now."

He sighed. "The doom of all planets sooner or later. Even after their Sun has waned they can live while their interior heat keeps them warm. But when that interior planetary heat dies the planet must be abandoned. There are many such out among the stars."

Lal'lor spoke in his throaty, husky voice. "But Jon Arnol still claims that a dead planet's interior heat can be rekindled. I looked over his equations myself."

And the bulky gray Miran—for that star had bred him, Kenniston had learned—repeated a staggering series of equations that the historian was as unable to follow as Kenniston himself.

Piers Eglin shook his head. "Jon Arnol is an enthusiast, a fanatic theorist. You know what happened when he tried a test."

More and more Kenniston found himself forgetting differences of time and culture and race as he worked with these newcomers to force life back into the veins of the city.

They had New Middletown's water system in full operation again, a great boon. They had many of the great atomic generators functioning and Gorr Holl and Magro were working hard to get the lighting system started.

To get tools and supplies they would need for other jobs Kenniston went with Hubble and Piers Eglin back across the cold ocher wasteland to Middletown.

"I shall see, with my own eyes, a town of the pre-atomic age!" the historian exulted.

It was strange to come upon old Middletown, standing so silent in the midst of desolation. The houses were as he had last seen them, the doors locked, the empty porch swings rocking in the cold wind. The streets were drifted thick with dust. The trees were bare and the last small blade of grass had died.

Kenniston saw that Hubble's eyes were misted and his own heart contracted with a terrible pang of longing. He wished that he had not come. Back in that other city, absorbed in the effort to survive, one could almost forget that there had been a life before.

He drove the jeep through those deathly streets, and memory spoke to him strongly of lost summers—girls in bright frocks, catalpa trees heavy with blossoms, the quarrelling of wrens, the lights and sounds of human voices in the drowsy evening.

Piers Eglin was speechless with joy, lost in an historian's dream as he walked the streets and looked into shops and houses.

"It must be preserved," Eglin whispered. "It is too precious. I will have them build a dome and seal it all—the signs, the artifacts, the beautiful scraps of paper!"

Hubble said abruptly, "There's someone here ahead of us."

Kenniston saw the small bullet-shaped car that stood outside that old Lab. Out of the building came Norden Lund and Varn Allan.

"We have been gathering data for my report," said the girl.

Lund's strong face was wrinkled in disgust. "We have enough. This place is repulsively dirty. Let's go back to the ship."

Kenniston glared angrily at the sorrel-haired official but it was to Varn Allan that he spoke. "And you?" he said bitterly. "What do you think of our aboriginal settlement?"

Her blue eyes gravely roved across the panorama of grimy mills, the towering stacks black with forgotten smokes, the rusting rails of the sidings, the drab little houses huddled along the narrow streets.

"It is saddening," she said. "Brave but pitiful. How glad you must be to leave it!"

HUBBLE saw his face and laid a hand on his arm. "Come on, Ken. We have work to do."

Kenniston turned and followed the older man. His hatred of the contemptuous Lund included the girl a little. And it stung more because there was fear in it—not fear of them but of the power they had in this new world.

When they came out of the building she and Lund were gone. In moody si-

lence Kenniston loaded their burden and drove the jeep away. Eglin peered back through the gathering dusk, seeming heartbroken to leave Middletown at all.

The dark bulk of the star-ship, the *Thanis*, loomed to their right as they drove on toward New Middletown. The great dome of the shadowed city glimmered faintly in the deeping dusk.

Suddenly a thing happened so miraculous that it took their breath. The whole city beneath the dome burst into white light.

The shadowy towers lit to a soft soaring glow, the streets were rivers of light, the whole dome a great bowl of wonderful luminescence.

"Gorr Holl and his crew have got the lights going, at last!" cried Kenniston.

"And it's beautiful," whispered Hubble raptly.

New Middletown seemed transformed into a fairy city as they drove through the portal. And all its people were in the streets now, joyful at their release from the long time of shadows, exultantly admiring the new beauty and splendor.

Carol Lane met Kenniston in the plaza, her eyes a reflection of the new brilliance around them. "Ken, isn't it wonderful? Like a dream!"

"It's only the beginning," he told her. "We'll have a good life here, yet, Carol!"

Gorr Holl and his crew came along the street, surrounded by an enthusiastically grateful crowd. The furry Capellan was hero of the city now. Carol shrank back a little as Kenniston pumped the Capellan's hand. Unlike him she had not lost the sense of the non-humans' strangeness.

Gorr Holl's unhuman face was split in his frightening grin. He rumbled, "Glad that job's done. We're going back to the *Thanis* for a rest before we start on the main power generators."

"If there's anything we can do to show our appreciation—" Mayor Garris began fervently.

Magro, the white-furred, aloof Spican, interrupted. He said something to Gorr Holl in a low rapid voice.

"No!" exclaimed the Capellan startledly. He looked upward.

"I heard," said Magro. "They will land in a few moments."

Kenniston felt a sudden tenseness. "What is it?"

"Star-ships coming, two of them, Magro says," rumbled the Capellan. "Yes, I can hear them too now."

They all could hear as the crowd fell silent—a dim droning that penetrated down from the sky through the great dome.

Kenniston, with a hasty word to Carol, turned and went back to the portal. Hubble and the others went with him.

He looked out, astonished. Two big black star-ships, as large as the *Thanis*, were dropping out of the starry sky to land beside it on the plain.

"Why have they come?"

Gorr Holl looked puzzled. "I don't know. Administrator Allan must have requested them but I don't know why."

A cold fear began to grow in Kenniston. He waited with them, and his fear grew and grew. Finally he saw a small group of people approaching from the star-ships.

Varn Allan and Lund were the only ones in the group he recognized. Of the others one was a woman—a mature older woman—and the remainder were men of varying ages.

The girl and her companions came up to where they stood waiting at the portal. There was a smug look about Norden Lund that Kenniston didn't like but Varn Allan had a certain anxiety in her manner.

She spoke directly to Kenniston as one of the few Middletowners who could understand her. "The Board of Governors of the Federation of Stars has issued a formal order," she began.

"Yes?" said Kenniston softly. "What is that order?"

Something in the very softness of his voice seemed to disturb her. She looked at him, worried, but continued steadily. "Our recommendation has been approved. Evacuation of all people on Earth to the second planet of the star Alto has been ordered."

Again she paused, looking at him and at the wondering puzzled crowd of Middletowners. Then, indicating the group of newcomers with her, she finished. "These officials head a large staff of experts on mass migration. They and their staff will begin preliminary planning of the evacuation. It is important that you cooperate with them fully so there will be no unnecessary delay in moving you to Alto Two."

Kenniston felt such a hot choking anger rising in him that for the moment he could not speak.

"I don't understand all this," the Mayor was complaining. "What's it all about?"

Others in the crowd echoed, "Yeah, what's she saying?"

Hubble, who had understood at least partly, clutched Kenniston's arm convulsively. "Ken, think fast! When these people find out the devil is going to break loose here!"

CHAPTER IX

Embattled City

KENNISTON forced himself to choke down his blind fury. He realized as well as Hubble the potential explosiveness of the situation. He spoke to Varn Allan, in a low hard voice.

"Get out of here. Go back to your ship—and go quickly!"

But still she did not understand.

"Can't you see that we're doing our best to save the lives of your people?" she said. "As Administrator of this sector I am responsible for your safety to the Board of Governors. Now will you translate that announcement so that everyone can hear?"

Kenniston's voice rose. "Are you so complete a fool as that? Don't you know *anything* about us yet?"

Mayor Garris was tugging at his arm. "What's it all about, Kenniston? What's wrong?"

"Listen," said Kenniston desperately

to Varn, "I'm trying to prevent violence. Go back to your ships now and I'll come out and talk to you later."

She stared at him in utter astonishment. "*Violence!*" she said. And again, "Violence? Against officials of the Federation?"

It crossed his mind that that was something she had never seen. In the momentary silence between them, Kenniston heard the voices of the crowd rapidly gathering behind him.

"What's happening? What did the new ships come for?"

"Maybe they brought more supplies and help!"

"You know a little of their lingo, Jim! What's she saying?"

The last question, Kenniston saw, was addressed to a little Middleton electrician who had helped him with Gorr Holl's atomic crew.

The little man's face was frightened. "I didn't get it all," he stammered. "Something about moving us—moving us to another world."

"That does it!" Hubble groaned.

"*Will you go?*" snarled Kenniston.

Varn Allan answered him with anger of her own. "No, we won't!"

Norden Lund added harshly, "If you think you primitives can defy Federation law you're going to find out—"

Lund had no chance to finish. A low, ugly muttering of the crowd had begun that swelled now to a roar. "They still want us to leave the Earth! They think they can *make* us go!"

"In ships like that, away from Earth? To blazes with 'em!"

"*Run 'em out!*"

The last shout was as a spark to tinder. The crowd roar rose to a howl. The press of men and women surged forward through the portal.

It was too late for persuasion now. Hubble and the Mayor were trying it and their voices went unheard. Angry Middletowners surged toward the bewildered officials.

"Get back into your ships and go!"

The dazed officials recoiled a little. Piers Eglin, looking badly scared, was

already retreating into the darkness toward the ships. But Varn Allan and Lund stood their ground. The sorrel-haired Sub-Administrator's hard voice lashed at Kenniston.

"If this mob of aborigines dares touch Federation officers—"

Kenniston sensed imminent disaster. He yelled across the crowd to Gorr Holl and his crew. "Gorr, get these people back to the ships—*fast!*"

The Capellan heard and his mighty furry figure plowed through the crowd with Magro and the rest of his crew behind him.

Already the angry horde was shoving the stunned officials forcibly out into the darkness. The woman official cried out in fear. Gorr Holl and his crew struggled to the side of the scared newcomers and grabbed them to hurry them away.

The Middletowners cried to Gorr Holl, "You don't have to go! You're good guys and we know you're with us!"

"It's these others, who are ordering us off Earth, that have to go!"

"That red-haired guy, and the girl!"

They converged angrily toward Varn Allan and Lund. Kenniston saw the danger. He grabbed the girl's wrist and began to run, hauling her along with him out into the darkness.

Lund yelled, "Take your hands off her!"

But the crowd was now shoving Lund roughly into the darkness too, toward the ships. Kenniston did not stop.

UNTIL now Varn Allan had not resisted as he dragged her along. He realized later that it must have been the first physical violence she had ever encountered. She was too astonished at first to resist.

Then she cried out passionately "Let me go!" and set her heels hard into the dust.

Kenniston heard the crowd boiling after them through the darkness and realized it was no time for niceties. He gave her wrist a jerk that snatched her off balance, then yanked her on toward the ship.

The vast metal bulk of the *Thanis* loomed in the dark before them. Gorr Holl and his comrades were getting the dazed officials up the gangway into the lighted, open port in the lower hull. Kenniston hauled Varn Allan up through the opening.

Inside the double bulkheads of the port was a round room sheathed in glittering metal, with passageways and catwalks leading off it. Here was crowded confusion—the scared officials, Gorr Holl and his companions, worried-looking men and officers of the ship's crew.

A bronzed ship-officer hastened to Varn Allan and exclaimed, "Shall we use the paralysis-ray on that crowd?"

Norden Lund, his face furious, pushed into the room at that moment. "If we don't that mob of primitives will storm the ship!"

"Use the ray only to frighten them back, Captain!" ordered Varn Allan.

The officer started to speak into a wall communicator-disk. But Kenniston leaped forward and tore him away from the instrument.

"No! They won't harm anyone—they merely want you to go."

He was too late. The order had already been given. Through the port he glimpsed flashes of light, darting from somewhere above him in the ship at the approaching mass of Middletowners.

The Middletowners recoiled in the darkness from those leaping beams. They had seen the ray in action before. As they gave back a deeper roar of anger went up from them.

"You fools, you're merely enraging them further!" Kenniston blazed. He grabbed the Captain of the *Thanis*, ordered him fiercely, "Have that ray turned off at once!"

"Beam that man!" he heard Norden Lund's harsh voice order.

"Kenniston, look out!" yelled Gorr Holl in rumbling warning.

Kenniston swung around and saw a crewman leveling a small glass instrument at him.

"No, wait—" exclaimed Varn Allan, but was too late.

As she spoke a tiny flash of light

leaped from the instrument and struck Kenniston's face. And then he knew nothing.

He came back to consciousness, lying flat on his face in a bunk with Gorr Holl's powerful fingers kneading the nerve centers along his spine. He groaned, and the Capellan exclaimed in relief.

"Thank the gods you've come round! I've been working on you the last couple of hours!"

Kenniston sat up painfully. He was in a small windowless cabin, furnished with a desk and a chair designed to accommodate Gorr Holl's huge proportions. He was still in the *Thanis*, then.

His body felt numb and leaden. He found it difficult even to speak. "What's happened, Gorr?"

"Plenty and all of it bad. Kenniston, I'm worried!"

The big Capellan had a tense anxiety about him that familiarity of weeks with him enabled Kenniston to detect.

"Look here!" said Gorr Holl.

He touched a stud. A square section of the metal wall became perfectly transparent, a window.

Kenniston struggled to his feet and looked out through it at the distant, shining dome of New Middletown, a wonderful inverted bowl of soft radiance. The Moon had risen and its copery light flooded all the plain.

Light—plenty of light to see the men of Middletown laboring in the ocher dust before the portal, digging trenches, filling sandbags, drawing up the lines of war.

Gorr Holl pointed off across the moonlit waste toward the far-off hills. Kenniston looked, and saw the brave small cavalcade that toiled down from them, out of the old town. He saw the shrouded field guns, the whole mobile force of the Middletown Armory of the National Guard—the little guns that came to bark defiance at the Federation of Stars.

Gorr Holl said, "They gave us three hours to pack up our traps and go—long enough to get their battery in position. After that they'll start shooting."

"The fools," Kenniston whispered.

"The poor bloody fools!" He could have wept with pride and yet he knew the inevitability of their defeat.

THE time was almost up. Those hurrying limbers would reach the portal and swing around and soon then the men of Middletown would cast the die of their own destruction.

"I've got to stop this, Gorr," he said. "Somehow, I've got to stop it!"

The big Capellan nodded heavily. "I know how you feel, Kenniston. I like your people, maybe because I'm a little on the aboriginal side myself. We of Capella don't have the millions of years of civilization behind us that men now have."

He sighed. "I'd like to help you do something but I'm afraid there's nothing you can do. Varn Allan's on the televisor now, getting authorization from Vega Center for the use of defensive force."

Kenniston looked again at the gallant little army, marching determinedly through the bitter night. He heard Gorr Holl's unhappy voice saying, "You'd better go back to them now while you can."

"No." Kenniston turned suddenly gripping Gorr Holl's great thick-furred arm. "Take me to Varn Allan, Gorr! Fast!"

Gorr Holl studied him a moment. "You're under technical arrest here, you know. But—all right, come on! Only in the name of all the gods, be careful what you do!"

The big Capellan led him out then swiftly through a maze of narrow passageways that ran through the bowels of the *Thanis*. They met no one and Kenniston knew that Gorr Holl had avoided the main corridors.

He hardly looked at what he could see of the ship as he passed through it. He didn't care. All he could think of was the terrible need for haste, the desperate need to avert the disaster that was coming.

His ears, his nerves cringed, waiting for the first shell to burst against the *Thanis*. He knew it was too soon but the

moments were passing fast.

"Hurry, Gorr. Hurry!"

They came out on a shadowy catwalk. Gorr Holl stopped and pointed to a corridor nine feet below. At its end was a closed door.

Gorr Holl whispered, "There's a sliding catch inside the door. Lund will be with her. Good luck."

He melted back into the shadows. Kenniston went down a companionway to the corridor and along it to the door at the end.

He tried it. It was locked. He knocked sharply upon it. In a moment it swung open and the irritated face of Norden Lund appeared.

"We are in conference with—" he began and then his chilly eyes widened in astonishment. "You here?"

He stepped out into the corridor and raised his voice in an angry call. "Orderlies!"

Kenniston hit him. His fist caught the square jaw and sent Lund crashing back against the wall.

"That," said Kenniston, "is for having me beamed down."

Lund, raging, came at him with clumsy violence. But Kenniston, child of an age of battle, struck swiftly again. This time Lund slumped down half-stunned. Kenniston hurdled over him through the door. He slammed it shut behind him and found the sliding catch. The bolt shot home. He turned then, panting.

He stood in a high and narrow room. Two walls were occupied by complicated and unfamiliar mechanisms, all apparently automatic. Facing him was the third wall—a giant-size screen.

Varn Allan was alone in that room. She had whirled about in startled amazement at the noise of his sudden entrance. But Kenniston hardly noticed her. He stood transfixed, staring at what was pictured in the screen.

A window into another world.

At a black plastic table sat four figures. Three of these were men in ordinary jackets and slacks—one of them quite old, another elderly, the third dark, brusque-looking, not far into middle age.

The fourth at the table was not a man. He was a Spican like Magro, white-furred and oddly catlike with his narrow mane and handsome faintly cruel face. But he was older and graver than Magro.

The four of them were like a quartet of businessmen, rudely interrupted in the midst of an earnest conference. They had risen half out of their chairs. They stared out of the screen at Kenniston.

The youngest man demanded sharply of Varn Allan, "Who is this person?"

Kenniston still stood motionless, looking beyond them now. He saw that the room behind them was like the one in which he stood but much larger, a communications-room massive with control-banks and screens.

Through the window of that room, billions of miles across space, Kenniston could see the looming wall of a titan building. And above it blazed the fiery limb of a diamond Sun, supernal, magnificent, shedding a blue-white blaze across the heavens.

A GAIN the sharp voice from across the galaxy, flashing through the parsecs far faster than light by the magic of latter-day science.

"Varn Allan! What's going on there? Who is this man?"

"He's one of the primitives, sir," she answered angrily, and started toward Kenniston. She spoke directly to him now. "You have no right here, Kenniston. Stand away from the door!"

"No!" He reached out and caught her wrist, looking at her with eyes as hard and angry as her own. "I won't go till I've had my say."

He thrust her back toward the screen and she raised her voice in a shout. "Orderlies!"

"They can't get in. No one can get in till I'm ready to let them. Stop struggling."

She subsided, and spoke steadily to the images in the screen. "I'm sorry, gentlemen. But perhaps this will illustrate the situation here more clearly. You can see how intractable these people are."

Kenniston glared upward at the four on Vega's world who seemed to hold the fate of Middletown in their hands. "You of the Board of Governors—" he began.

The oldest man interrupted quietly. "We're not the Board of Governors. That is a much larger affair. We're merely an executive committee of the Board."

"All right then—you of the executive committee," Kenniston continued impatiently, "I'm sorry to break in on you by violence. But in a few minutes there's going to be worse violence. In a few minutes my people are going to fire on your ships."

"I don't want that to happen. I don't want my people killed nor yours. I had to make somebody listen to me!"

Again the oldest of the men in the screen spoke quietly. "You may release Administrator Allan. We shall listen to you." He turned to the girl. "I think, Allan, that since the interruption has been made, we may as well clear this thing up now."

He waited until Kenniston had let go the girl's wrist. Then he said, "There will be no one killed. The paralysis ray, used at full potency, can immobilize your whole population without harm."

Kenniston shook his head. "That's only a postponement," he said. "When they come to again they will fight. That is what I must make you understand. *As long as my people live they will fight to stay on Earth!*"

The ring of utter truth in his passionate cry seemed to disturb them deeply. And the white-furred Spican said slowly, "It may be so. My own people had such an illogical attachment to one planet long ago."

But the old man spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "We *cannot* change our decision. Remember, we have many other waning planets whose populations must be transferred. If we let these people stay on dying Earth it will set a fatal precedent."

Kenniston, fearfully aware of the speeding minutes, felt a desperation. "Is there no appeal from your decision?"

he demanded harshly.

"Yes. You may appeal to the Board of Governors in full session. But I warn you their decision will be the same as ours in this case."

He seized on that possible loophole. "Then I *do* appeal to the Governors! And until they decide I demand that you withdraw from Earth the ships that have caused the whole critical situation here!"

The Spican looked at Kenniston with faint amusement in his slit-pupiled eyes. He told the oldest man, "By all basic law his demand is legal enough."

"It's only a stratagem to gain time," said the dark younger man impatiently.

It was that, Kenniston knew. But even a postponement of disaster was worth fighting for.

The older man said finally, "I am forced by Federation law to grant your demand. But I warn you again that the Governors will ratify our decision."

He continued. "The ships will be withdrawn temporarily to Vega. You will come with them since all appeals to the Governors must be presented in person."

In person? The significance of the two words staggered Kenniston. They meant going to Vega, far across the galaxy. They meant leaving Carol, leaving Earth itself, to go out into the starry universe on this forlorn hope.

He knew how forlorn it was. The responsibility for Middletown's future would be on his shoulders with all the cards stacked against him.

Varn Allan's cool voice challenged him. "Do you agree to go? Say quickly—there's scarcely time enough to notify your people before they attack!"

Kenniston took a deep breath. "Yes. I'll go."

CHAPTER X

Mission for Earth

HE would not show fear. They expected him to do so, they were watching him with sidelong glances of

interest and amused expectation. But Kenniston clenched his fists inside his jacket pockets and resolved fiercely to disappoint them.

He was afraid, yes. He hadn't thought he would be but he was. It was one thing to read and talk and speculate on flying space. It was another and more frightening thing to *do* it, to step off from the solid Earth, to rush and plunge and fall through the worldless emptiness.

He stood there with Piers Eglin and Gorr Holl on the bridge of the *Thanis*, looking ahead through the curving view-windows, and a cold sickness clutched at his vitals.

"It isn't the way I expected it to be," he said unsteadily. "Only those stars ahead—"

He fought against an impulse to clutch for support. He wouldn't do that while the bronzed star-men behind him were curiously watching him. The deep humming and slight quivering of the great fabric around him were the only evidence that the *Thanis* was moving.

Directly ahead Kenniston looked at a depthless black in which fierce stars flared like lamps. The blue-hot beacon of Vega centered that vista and from it blazed the stars of the Lyre and Aquila, crossed on the upper left by the glittering hiving sundrift of the Milky Way.

Only that section of sky ahead was clear. The rest of the firmament, extending back from it, was an increasingly blurred vista of distorted star-groups whose rays seemed to twitch, jerk and dance.

Gorr Holl nodded toward the bank of controls behind which four men sat. "You know the principle of propulsion? Reaction-rays many times faster than light, pushing back against the cosmic dust of space."

Kenniston sighed. "I feel ignorant as a child. The possibility of such rays was wholly unsuspected in my day. And Einstein's equations proved that if matter moved faster than light it would expand indefinitely."

Gorr Holl uttered a rumbling chuckle. "Your Einstein was a great scientist but we've opened up new fields of knowl-

edge since then. The mass-control that prevents that expansion and other things."

Kenniston was only half-listening. He was looking at the blue-white eye of Vega, glaring arrogantly at him from the great drift of spangled stars. And looking at it somehow made him sense their awful speed, their nightmare fall through the infinite.

He tried to visualize the ordeal that awaited him there, when he must plead the cause of little Middletown to the Governors of the stars. How could he make people like this, people whose world was the whole vast vault of the galaxy, understand the passionate devotion of his own people to their ancient little planet?

Yet if he failed to do so he would fail the people of Middletown, who now put such hope in his mission. He remembered their eager optimism when they had learned of the truce he had won, the departing of the star-ships. He remembered Mayor Garris' confident leave-taking.

"We know you'll fix it up, Kenniston—make these star-people understand things so they'll let us alone!"

And he remembered Hubble's drawn anxious face. "Do the best you can for us, Ken. Even postponing the issue a little longer will help."

But also he remembered Carol's parting words. He watched the color drain slowly out of her face when she heard he was going with the star-ships.

"No, Ken. No!" she whispered and he took her in his arms and tried to explain. But she only shook her head. "It's too big for us, Ken, too far beyond us. We're like tiny children trying to fight an army of men."

She held to him then with a desperate strength. "Don't go. You're not like them. You'll die out there!"

"Nonsense," he said and tried to kiss her. She thrust him away, looking at him, he thought, as though he were already lost to her.

"It's hopeless, Ken. You can't change the purposes and plans of these people, this whole universe."

She ran from him, then, and he had gone away with her words tolling in his ears—

It's hopeless—hopeless—

He could hear them now. And he felt that they were true.

FIERCELY he told himself that he would not let them be true. There was still one remote hope, his one possible weapon in the struggle to come. He asked Gorr Holl abruptly, "Where's Lal'lor? There's something I want to talk over with him."

The Capellan looked surprised. "He's down in his cabin. It's just two doors from mine."

Kenniston had learned the plan of the ship a little. He found his way hesitantly down the companionways and narrow corridors. It was a relief to be in a closed place without windows so that he need not look at the staggering crushing emptiness of space, where only the proud suns had any right to be. There was a wild thrill to that, yes—but a 20th-century man couldn't take too much of it at first.

He found Lal'lor's massive gray form bent over a table littered with sheets of complicated symbols. The Miran looked up, his flat, featureless face and little eyes inquiring.

"No, you are not interrupting," he told Kenniston. "I've been working some theorems for amusement. These voyages are tedious."

Kenniston sat down. He had long ago quit thinking of the Miran as less than human. He felt those shrewd little eyes searching his face.

"Back in New Middletown, Lal'lor, you said something about a scientist named Jon Arnol. One who has a theory as to the rejuvenation of cold, dying planets."

"Yes, I remember," said Lal'lor. "You're interested in Arnol's work? He has been a friend of mine for some years."

Kenniston leaned forward. "Is there anything to his theory—any possibility that he could really make a cold dying world warm again?"

Lal'lor paused before replying. "Arnol's plan is this—to start a cycle of matter-energy transformation similar to the hydrogen-helium transformation which gives a Sun its energy—to start such a nuclear cycle operating deep *inside* a cold planet."

Kenniston was startled. "Why—that would be equivalent to creating a giant solar furnace deep inside the planet!"

"Yes. A bold brilliant idea. It would solve the problem of the many cold dying planets of the Federation. But unfortunately, when Arnol tested it on a small asteroid, the results were disastrous."

"Disastrous?"

"Quite disastrous. Arnol's energy-bomb, designed to start the cycle inside that asteroid, went wrong and caused terrible quakes. He claims it was because he was not allowed a large enough planet for his test. His equations bear out that claim."

"But wouldn't they allow him a test on a bigger planet then?" asked Kenniston.

"No. The Board of Governors ruled that in its present stage of development his process was too dangerous to be tried again."

Kenniston felt a deep dismay. It seemed that his one remote hope was slipping away from him. The wise little eyes of the Miran watched him. Lal'lor asked, "Kenniston—you were not hoping to try Arnol's process on your Earth?"

Kenniston shook his head. "Not exactly. What I hoped was that the process was so promising that the Governors would let my people stay on Earth until at some future time it could be made warm and livable."

"I fear," said Lal'lor, "that they are now too prejudiced against the whole idea for that. Still, it is worth your trying. I'll get in touch with Arnol and he can help you prepare your plea."

Kenniston thanked him but without conviction. What he had just heard made his task of persuading the Governors even less possible. Why had he come? Why had he tried? It was like a cave-man going to argue with a 20th-century parliament on a governmental problem.

"*Hopeless*—" The despairing words mocked him, again.

He was still sitting in discouraged silence with Lal'lor when Gorr Holl and Magro and Piers Eglin came in. "Space-sick, Kenniston?" rumbled the Capellan. "You look pretty down. Well, a first voyage is hard on anyone."

"It isn't that," Kenniston said heavily.

Gorr Holl shot a keen glance at him. "You need something. And I think I know what it is."

He went out and returned in a moment with a large flat flask of gray metal. He showed his great teeth in that frightening grin. "Fortunately, not being ship's personnel, we of the technical staff are not forbidden stimulants. Get some cups, Magro."

The white-furred Spican brought only four of the plastic cups. "Our wise Lal'lor prefers to stimulate himself with equations," he explained and the gray one nodded.

Gorr Holl carefully poured a clear liquid from the flask. "Try this, Kenniston."

The liquid had a musty mushroomy taste. Then it seemed to explode inside Kenniston, sending waves of heat to his fingertips.

WHEN he could breathe again, he gasped, "What is the stuff?"

Piers Eglin answered pedantically, "It is distilled from fungus growths found on the worlds of Capella."

Kenniston, as he drank again, felt his worries recede a little. He sat relaxed and listening as these children of alien worlds talked on.

"I remember how tough my own first voyage was," Magro was saying. He was curled up on the bunk like a sleepy cat, with a distant lazy gleam in his eyes. "We shot the Pleiades with half our power burned out and the little worlds swarming around us like angry bees."

Gorr Holl nodded. "Do you mean that wreck in the Algol stardrift? I lost good friends then. A cold grave, those empty deeps."

Kenniston listened as they talked on of old voyages beyond the Federation's

starry frontiers, of dangers from nebula and comet and cosmic cloud, of shipwreck on wild worlds.

He quoted slowly, "Then shall we list to no shallow gossip of Magellans and Drakes. Then shall we give ear to voyagers who have circumnavigated the Ecliptic; who have rounded the Polar Star as Cape Horn."

Piers Eglin asked interestedly, "Who wrote that? Some man of your own time who foresaw space-travel?"

"No," said Kenniston. "A man of a century before even my time. His name was Melville and he was a sailor too but on Earth's seas."

Gorr Holl shook his head. "Queer days they must have been with only the water-oceans of one little planet to venture on."

"Yet there was adventure enough in that," Kenniston said. "The Atlantic in a fall storm, the Gulf on a moonlight night—"

An aching nostalgia took him again, that haunting homesickness for an Earth lost forever, made more heart-breaking by the alien immensities of space around him, by the puzzled lack of understanding in these strange, friendly faces.

"Give me another drink," he said.

It did not help any. It only seemed to heighten his futile yearning. Presently Kenniston left them and went back to his own cabin.

The strangeness, the hopelessness of speeding across interstellar space to plead for a dead world came over him. He switched off the cabin lights and pressed the stud that made a window of the solid hull.

The black star-shot gulf opened to infinity beyond. He sat down on the edge of the bunk. His eyes brooded upon that uncaring unhuman immensity. He sat unstirring, his shoulders bent.

Kenniston realized after awhile that someone was knocking at his door.

He rose and opened it. Light poured in from the corridor and showed him the lithe tall figure of Varn Allan. She glanced quickly from his face to the darkened room and then back at him.

A look of understanding faintly softened her clear face.

"May I come in?" she asked.

He stepped aside, reaching for the switch and she said, "No, don't. I like to look out too. And I'll only be a moment."

She stood by the window. The dim star-glow touched her face and made him realize its beauty.

She said abruptly, "I too have sat like that, feeling hopeless, staring into space. It must be worse for you, Kenniston."

He stared at her in such obvious astonishment that her voice took an edge of resentment. "Are you so surprised that I should try to understand? Why do I hold office as Administrator if not to help all the people in my sector?"

"I am beginning to realize," Kenniston said slowly, "that you are not what I thought."

"I'm not your enemy if that's what you mean," she said. "You thought so because I was a symbol of the strangeness that bewildered you."

Varn Allan continued. "I've tried to comprehend your motives. Men don't suffer and strive as you and your people have done without reason. Your reasons seem to me childishly emotional, yet I realize that they are very real to you."

She added a little helplessly, "Your coming into our time is an unheard-of thing. It poses us a difficult problem—a people both civilized and primitive, whose psychology is strange to us and who refuse to conform."

Kenniston said a little ruefully, "No, we were never much for conforming."

"Yet you are in our universe now and must abide by its basic rules. Your problem is to convince the Governors that you can reconcile your desire to stay on Earth with those rules."

She concluded. "And this is what I came to tell you. We will land on Vega Four in two days. Owing to the pressing nature of this case the Board of Governors has granted us two hours on the following day. Prepare your case carefully for there is never a second hearing."

"Two hours!" exclaimed Kenniston.

It did not seem much time in which to decide the fate of a world.

"The Governors have the problems of a galaxy to decide. They cannot give more time than that to anyone."

She turned to go. "If you need any help in drawing up your plea I'll give it to you. But it's only fair to warn you, Kenniston, that Norden Lund will fight you every way he can. He hates you personally. And he is ambitious."

She had her hand on the latch. Kenniston said, "Please, Varn—wait." He hesitated, then told her, "I only want to say that it helps a lot, knowing you're not against us."

"I am against nothing but injustice," she said soberly. "We Administrators may make mistakes but the people of the Federation trust us because they know we always try to be just."

He held out his hand. "Anyway—thanks."

SHE was for a moment completely puzzled by his gesture, then understood and awkwardly laid her hand in his.

Kenniston did not see her again until they made their landing on Vega Four.

He had stood for hours that day in the bridge-room of the *Thanis*, looking with unbelieving wonderment at the alien solar system shaping itself out of the void, the spinning planets sweeping in majestic curves through the brilliant circle of Vega's light.

Varn Allan came into the bridge with Norden Lund. The sorrel-haired Sub-Administrator glared at him but did not speak. But Varn greeted Kenniston with an oddly hesitant smile. "We land in a few hours. I hope you have your case prepared?"

"I know what I want to say to your Board of Governors—whether I can express it effectively I'm not sure," he said, worried.

He didn't like the veiled amusement that came into Lund's chilly eyes at that. But he forgot it as he looked ahead with Varn Allan.

The *Thanis* was sweeping in toward the fourth planet. Kenniston saw the

cloudy globe leap up to meet them. As they hummed downward he was stricken with a vertiginous fear that they were going to crash.

He glimpsed a vast landscape whose dominant colors were quite unearthly. Cruel lofty mountains of purple-black rock rose grandly beyond broad blue plains. Then the rushing ship swept over a great expanse of vivid yellow—a golden ocean that flashed back Vega's brilliance blindingly.

And then a city—a white, towering continent of a city that even viewed from the stratosphere was enough to take Kenniston's breath away. There was a huge star-ship port near it and the *Thanis* was dropping through tangled shipping traffic toward it.

Vega Four—he was here.

And he could not believe it, not even now.

Yet when he left the ship it felt the same as Earth underfoot. And the air, though laden with faint strange scents, seemed the same.

"Yes," said Varn Allan. "It is like Earth in many ways. That is why it became a great center long ago when Earth was abandoned."

She and Piers Eglin and Gorr Holl were with him in the official car—a sleek machine, very swift and silent, that carried them from the monster starport to the city itself.

Kenniston's dazed eyes tried to cope with a flashing panorama of mighty buildings, of parks and squares brilliant with unfamiliar foliage, of broad avenues thronged with people—men and women of his own breed for the most part but admixed strongly with the non-human folk of the galaxy.

Some of these latter races he was familiar with through Gorr Holl and the others. Many that he glimpsed were strange to him. But he noticed that they were all more or less manlike in form.

"It's quite natural," said Piers Eglin when he mentioned this, "that the Federation should include only humanoid races. There are other completely alien intelligent races. But their psychology is so different from ours that they could

never cooperate efficiently with us."

Varn Allan nodded.

"We let them alone and they in turn don't disturb us."

The car halted at last before the southern portal of a massive marble building that seemed to extend for several miles.

"This is Government Center," said the girl. "Quarters have been assigned to you here. Gorr Holl will guide you and see that you are made comfortable."

She added earnestly before driving off, "Don't think of the strangeness, Kenniston. Keep thinking of what you must say tomorrow."

When he and Gorr Holl reached the apartment designated as his, the big furry Capellan told him, "Lal'lor asked me to say that he will join you soon. He sent a message ahead to Jon Arnol, whose workshop is on the other side of this planet. Arnol was to be waiting and he'll bring him."

Lal'lor came soon—and with the stodgy gray Miran was a man of Kenniston's own age. Jon Arnol had a lean worn face and the eyes of a dreamer. But his whole being radiated feverish hope.

"This problem of Earth may finally give me the chance I've been pleading for," he said. "The chance to prove that my theory of planet-rejuvenation is sound!"

Then, ashamedly, he told Kenniston, "I'm sorry if I sound selfish. I know from what Lal'lor says that you have your own terrible problem. But if you knew how long I've sweated and hoped—"

Lal'lor interrupted. The Miran told Kenniston gravely, "I must warn you that your chances tomorrow are not good. Last night I overheard Lund talking on the ship. He said that he had found out something about you and your people."

"What did he find out?" exclaimed Kenniston, in dismay.

Lal'lor said, "I don't know. But Lund was happier than I have ever seen him. He said that this knowledge, whatever it is, will destroy your case completely!"

CHAPTER XI

Judgment of the Stars

KENNISTON clenched his hands under the table of gleaming plastic and clung hard to his sanity.

This is true, he told himself fiercely. It is happening and I am not mad. I am John Kenniston. Only a few weeks ago I was in New York. Now I am in a place called Vega Center. I am still John Kenniston. Only the world has changed.

But he knew that it was not so. He knew that Vega Center and the marble amphitheatre in which he sat were only shadows in a shifting nightmare from which he could not wake.

Unsteadily, he looked upward. They sat silently, row upon row of them, tier upon tier, full circle around the vast echoing space, reaching up into the shadowy vault, watching him with the crushing thousands of their eyes, human and unhuman, curious, intent.

The hosts of the Federation of Stars—the Board of Governors in full session.

These countless hundreds who came from the far-flung worlds of a galaxy—to them, he must seem equally unreal. It would seem impossible to them that they looked down upon a man of the forgotten past.

Varn Allan's quiet earnest voice broke in upon his reeling thoughts. She was finishing her report on Middletown.

"This is a complex situation. In finding a solution for it, I would ask you to remember that these people are a special case for which there is no precedent. In my belief they are entitled to special consideration."

She glanced at Norden Lund, who sat next her at the table. "Perhaps Sub-Administrator Lund has something to add to that report."

Lund smiled. "No. I shall reserve my right to speak until later." His eyes held an unpleasant gleam of anticipation.

There was a moment of silence. And Kenniston could hear the soft gigantic rustling, the breathing and small stir-

rings of the ranked thousands of the Governors.

The Spokesman, a small alert man who was the voice of the Board, the questioner, and who sat with them at the table, said, "The Board of Governors recognizes Kenniston, of Sol Three."

The rulers of the galaxy were waiting for him to speak. Others were waiting too. They were waiting in the dusk and cold of Sol Three, the little world whose ancient name of Earth had been all but forgotten in these halls of government. The mill-hands, the housewives, the rich men and the poor, the folk of Middletown.

Varn Allan looked at him and smiled. He took a deep breath. He forced himself to speak. He forced the words to come out of the tight dark corridors of fear.

"We did not ask to come into your time. Having come, we are under Federation law and we do not defy your authority as such. We do not wish to make trouble. Our problem is a psychological one . . ."

He tried to explain to these men of the Federation, something of what life had been like before that fateful morning in June. He tried to make them understand how his people were bound to their world and why they must cling to it so desperately.

"I understand the technological problems of supporting life on a world such as ours. But we have known privation and suffering before. We are not afraid of them. And we believe that, given time, we can solve those problems.

"We don't even ask you for help though we would be grateful if you cared to give it. All we ask of you is to be let alone, to work out our own salvation!"

He stopped. The silence, the thousands of watching eyes, bore down upon him with a crushing weight. Kenniston struggled for a final word. There was so much he had not said—so much that could never be put into words.

How do you phrase the history of the race of men, the pride and sorrow of their beginning?

He said, "Earth is the mother that

bore you. You should not let her die!"

It was done. For good or ill it was done and over.

Jon Arnol leaned from where he sat beside him at the table. "Magnificent," he whispered. And again, "*Magnificent!*"

The Spokesman asked, "Is it through the application of Jon Arnol's theories that you hope to bring back life to Sol Three?"

Before Kenniston could answer Arnol himself cried out, "On that point, I ask leave to speak!"

The Spokesman nodded.

Arnol rose. The fierce energy that drove him could not be contained for long in any chair. He seemed to face the entire Board of Governors at once, turning his dark challenging gaze upon them.

"You have denied me another chance to test my process—in spite of the fact that no reputable scientist can challenge my equations. And that is partly my fault. In my eagerness I was foolish enough to perform that first test on a world that I knew had insufficient mass relative to the thrust of the energy-blast released in its core.

"Earth is not such a world. The experiment will succeed there. Think what that would mean! The immediate problem now before you would be solved—and also the far greater problem of dying worlds, which has beset us from the beginning. Remember, you can't go on moving populations forever!"

He paused. Then his voice rang out sternly. "You were too cautious before to grant me an adequate test. You have no right to be cautious now. You have no right to deny to the peoples of the Federation the incalculable good that this process can do them. Therefore, I ask your permission to prove my theory, using the planet Sol Three as the subject!"

HE sat down. There was much whispering in the ranks of the Governors, a nodding together of heads. Kenniston stared hungrily at their faces.

"I think," Jon Arnol whispered, "we may have done it!"

The Spokesman lifted his gavel, about to signal the beginning of the vote. Norden Lund said, "I now claim my right to speak."

It was granted. And Kenniston felt his heart stop beating. Lund's voice rang through the amphitheatre. He tried to keep it unemotional but he could not quite erase from it a note of vengeful anger.

"There is one fact concerning these so-called Middletowners that has not been mentioned—a fact which I learned from the records I brought from Earth and have since had deciphered.

"You have been told that these Middletowners are a kindly harmless folk. You are asked to be sorry for them, to give them special indulgences, to overlook their little violences. And why? Because they are pathetic creatures, innocent victims of a freak of chance that threw them forward along their world-line."

Lund's face hardened. His voice thundered wrathfully. "It was no freak of chance that brought them into our time. It was an act of war!"

He paused, to let them understand that. Kenniston saw Varn Allan's face. She was looking at Lund in amazement.

Lund went on. "Let Kenniston deny this if he can! It was the explosion of a hostile atomic bomb that ruptured the continuum and hurled his city through. These people are the children of war, born and bred in an age of wars.

"Consider the mob violence, the threats made against Federation officials, the refusal to accept peaceful authority! Consider that at this moment those kindly folk of Middletown are prepared for war, their trenches dug, their guns in place, ready to fire on the first Federation ship that lands!"

Lund's voice dropped to a lower, tenser pitch. "I warn you that these people are rotten with the plague of war. For centuries we of the Federation struggled to find release from war and we found it. The galaxy has been clean of that hideous disease. Now it has appeared again among us.

"And we—the upholders of Feder-

ation law—are wavering before a show of force!"

Kenniston was on his feet. Jon Arnol clung to him, holding him back. Varn Allan leaned over the table, telling him in a desperate undertone, "Don't, Kenniston! Keep your temper!"

The Spokesman asked of Lund, "What is your recommendation to the Board of Governors?"

Lund cried, "Show these people that they cannot flout peaceful authority with a threat of war! Remove them as quickly as possible to some isolated world on the frontiers of the galaxy—a world so remote that they cannot infect the main thought-currents of the Federation with their brute psychology!"

Kenniston broke away from Arnol's grasp. He strode up to Lund and took him by the front of his jacket and bent over him a face so white with anger that Lund quailed before it.

"Who are you," snarled Kenniston, "to sit in judgment upon us?"

The words choked in his throat. He thrust Lund from him, flung him away so that he went sprawling to his knees and turned to face the Governors.

"Yes, we fought our wars! We fought because we had to, so that thought and progress and freedom could live in our world. You owe us for that! You owe us for the men that died so that there could one day be a Federation of Stars. You owe us for atomic power too. We may have misused it—but it's the force that built your civilization and we gave it to you!"

"Think of those things, you men of the future! From Earth you came and your whole civilization is rooted in our blood. You live in peace because we died in war. Remember that when you sit in judgment upon the past!"

He stood silent then, trembling, and Varn Allan came to bring him back to his chair.

Lund had got to his feet. He said, "I will let Kenniston's own actions stand as my final argument."

He sat down. The Spokesman brought down his gavel. Kenniston was hardly aware of the taking of the vote. He

wrestled with a dark turmoil of anger and doubt and fear, dreading to hear the words of judgment he knew were coming.

At last they came. "It is the final decision of the Board of Governors that the population of Sol Three shall be evacuated in accordance with the official order already outstanding.

"No experiments with the Arnol process on a planetary scale can be considered safe at this time.

"It is the wish of the Governors that the people of Sol Three be peaceably assimilated into the Federation. It is hoped that their attitude in the future will be such as to make this possible. If it is not, then they must be shown the futility of armed resistance. The hearing is concluded."

Kenniston realized that Arnol was telling him to get up. He rose and went out of the amphitheatre with the others. He heard Varn Allan's voice speaking in curt indignation to Norden Lund, who laughed and presently went away.

Nothing was very clear to him after that until he was back in his own quarters and Gorr Holl was putting a glass in his hand. Magro and Lal'lor had waited there for the verdict. Varn Allan was still with him and Arnol.

"I'm sorry, Kenniston," said Varn and he knew she meant it. He shook his head.

"It was my fault. If I hadn't lost my temper."

"Don't blame yourself, Kenniston. Forgive me, but Lund had just enough truth on his side to carry the day. The Board of Governors will not stand for bullying. And you'll have to admit that's what it looks like."

SHE paced the room twice, frowning, then said, "I have a little influence here and there. I'm going to try to get an extension of time on that order. Perhaps it'll soften the blow a little, let your people get used to the idea."

She laid her hand briefly on Kenniston's shoulder. "Don't take it too hard. Nobody could have done a better job than you did."

She went out. Gorr Holl supplied the dejected Jon Arnol with a drink. "Cheer up," he said. "You'll get another chance."

Arnold laughed. It was not a pleasant sound.

Kenniston was thinking sickly of the people back there on Earth, waiting anxiously for his return. He was thinking of Carol and her words echoed heavily through his mind. "*Hopeless—*"

He said slowly, "I can't go back. I can't face them and tell them I've failed."

"They'll get over it," Gorr Holl said reassuringly. "After all, going to a strange world isn't half as much of a shock as being hurled forward in time. They stood that."

"It happened before they knew it," said Kenniston. "That makes a difference. And they were still in a place they knew. No. They won't get used to it. They'll fight it to the bitter end."

He spread his hands in a gesture of futile anger. "That's what I can't make anybody, even you, understand! They belong on Earth. It's like an extension of themselves. They will risk any danger, dare any threat to hold onto it!"

His gaze fell then on Jon Arnol's bitter face, abstracted and brooding on his own disappointment. Kenniston's pulse gave a sudden leap.

He said softly, "Any danger, any threat—yes. By heaven, yes!"

He was suddenly shaken by a terrible, desperate hope. He got up and went across the room to Jon Arnol. "You said that you had a small star-cruiser and technical crew of your own?" Kenniston said.

Arnol nodded. "Yes. Over at my workshop in the mountains. He added bitterly, "I sent them word last night to get the cruiser ready to go to Earth. I was so sure that our chance had come."

Kenniston asked him softly, "Tell me, Arnol. Do you really believe in your own process?"

Arnol got to his feet. His eyes were suddenly hot and he looked as if he would hit the Earthman.

Kenniston demanded, "Do you believe in it enough to defy an order of the Board?"

Arnol stiffened. After a moment he said, "Explain that, Kenniston."

Kenniston explained. Fairly shaking with the intensity of his idea, he talked—and gradually Arnol's eyes took on a febrile glitter.

He muttered, "It *could* be done quickly there on Earth. The ancient heat-shafts would eliminate the necessity of deep boring."

But then he shook his head in a kind of dread. "No! It would mean dismissal from the College of Scientists, exile for the rest of my life. I can't do it."

"You've worked and hoped for many years," Kenniston reminded cruelly. "Some day you'll give up hoping and your process will be forgotten and lost."

He stood back. "I won't say any more—except that here is your chance if you wish to take it—your chance to try your planet-rejuvenation process on Earth!"

He waited then, silent. Gorr Holl and the others watched. The Capellan's eyes were very bright. Arnol put his head in his hands and groaned.

"I can't I *can't!* And yet—they'll never grant permission, that I know. They aren't scientists. They're afraid of some planetary disaster and they won't take the risks. A whole life's work, wasted."

Kenniston watched him suffer, caught between desire and fear. And at last Arnol struggled to a decision. He said, hesitantly,

"We would have to leave it to your people to decide, Kenniston. They must agree to accept the risk."

"I know them and I know they'll agree!" Kenniston exclaimed. "And if they do?"

Beads of sweat stood on Arnol's forehead. "If they're willing I'll do it," he said huskily.

A great excitement coursed through Kenniston. One chance—one last chance after all! He looked challengingly at Gorr Holl and Magro and Lal'lor.

"Well?" he demanded harshly. "Are you with us or against us?"

"Kenniston," said Lal'lor quietly, "you are not speaking to enemies. We are your friends."

The quiet voice cooled his fever of trembling excitement a little. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "I know that. I didn't mean—"

"We understand," said the old Miran. "I am sure we would all like to help."

"You and Arnol are both crazy, Kenniston," growled Gorr Holl. "I think you need a guardian. So—I'd better go along."

He grinned then. "Besides I like you and your people. You don't give up easily. I guess I'm still just a primitive myself."

Magro sighed. "And I shall have to go too then to keep Gorr Holl out of trouble."

Kenniston felt a gratitude so big that he could not voice it.

Jon Arnol was saying excitedly, "My flier is docked at South Port near here. It won't take long to get to my mountain workshop."

"Good," said Gorr Holl. He turned to Lal'lor. "You, gray one, shall stay here and cover for us. Tell anyone who asks that we have all gone out to show Kenniston the sights."

Lal'lor nodded. "Try to be careful, Gorr."

They left the apartment. Ten minutes later their flier was splitting the night on the way to the other side of Vega Four.

CHAPTER XII

Fateful Return

ANOTHER night had come. Under the brilliant unfamiliar stars, black mountain-peaks looked down broodingly at the scene of feverish activity on the little plateau.

Lights flared there, illuminating the little group of long low buildings, the supply-yard with its crane, the dim metal mass of a small star-cruiser, battered and tarnished by long use. A wide hatch gaped in the side of the ship's hull. And toward it Kenniston and his

three companions were carefully rolling a massive black ovoid that rested in a wheeled cradle.

"You needn't worry—there's no danger of detonating it when it isn't even electrofused," Jon Arnol was saying reassuringly.

"Listen, if this energy bomb is able to change a whole planet I'm treating it with respect!" rumbled Gorr Holl.

Kenniston felt the unreality of it. The whole scheme now seemed to him mad, harebrained. This big black mass his hand touched—how could it change the future of a world?

He tried to fight down these doubts. The scientists of this latter-day universe, masters of a knowledge far beyond his own, had affirmed the soundness of Arnol's theory. That was what had nerved him to start this project. He must cling to that. It was too late now for questions.

He was tired, dead tired. They had worked without respite all through the day, he and Gorr Holl and Magro, helping Arnol and his technical crew to load the masses of supplies and incomprehensible equipment necessary for the experiment.

The little star-cruiser was Arnol's work-ship. It had carried him on many research trips throughout the galaxy. And the eager young men of the crew, who had worked and dreamed beside Arnol for so long, had asked no questions. Whether or not they guessed what their mission was to be Kenniston had no way of knowing.

The Chief Pilot came up to Arnol as the four of them reached the hatchway with their cryptic burden. "She's all checked and ready for take-off whenever you are."

Arnol nodded. The technical men were taking over the task of loading the energy bomb and making it fast in its shockproof well.

"As soon as they're through," said Arnol. He glanced at Kenniston and the others with a weary triumphant smile.

"In about twenty minutes, we'll be on our way."

It was then that Kenniston saw the

jet-streams of a flier drawing a distant curve of flame across the sky, coming toward the plateau. The others saw it, too. They waited while the technical crew labored swiftly on.

Kenniston said, "It must be Lal'lor with a message!"

"Yes," said Arnol. "No one else could know we were here."

Yet their uneasiness grew as they watched the flier sweep in to a landing. Kenniston thought desperately, "No one else *could* know! We couldn't have been followed!"

He found himself running with the others across the flat surface of the landing field. He saw the figure that stepped out of the flier. It was not the bulky gray form of the Miran.

It was Varn Allan. And behind her, his face alight with triumph, came Norden Lund. Kenniston stopped, his heart sinking with cold despair. They had been found out then. They had been followed.

Varn Allan came toward them in the white glare of the work-lights, her face shocked and incredulous. "Kenniston! Arnol!" she cried and then stared at Magro and Gorr Holl and at the star-cruiser as though she could not credit what she saw.

"Well?" Lund asked her. "What have you got to say about them now?"

"Nothing." She continued to look at Kenniston and he could see the anger rising in her, the disappointment and hurt, as though he had betrayed her faith in him.

"Lund had you watched," she said. "You and Arnol. He told me what was going on. I refused to believe it. I even accused him of lying."

SHE paused, her blue eyes growing hot, fixed on Kenniston. "You *are* a complete barbarian!" she told him furiously. "You have no respect for law and so little decency that you drag your friends into this with you. I'm beginning to think Lund is right. You and your people should be quarantined."

She glared at Arnol. "As for you, Jon Arnol, I think you've gone too far this

time. You know the penalty of breaking Federation law even if Kenniston hasn't learned it yet."

"Arrest," said Lund happily. "Arrest and exile for all of you. Perhaps next time, Varn, you'll listen to me sooner."

As though stung, Varn Allan swung around to face him. "Your duty at this moment, Sub-Administrator Lund, is to advise Vega Center of this situation."

Lund turned to go back to the flier. Its radio-televisor, Kenniston knew, would put him into instant contact with the government center.

He sprang forward in running strides. He caught up to Lund and with one hand on the man's shoulder he spun him around. With the other he smashed a driving blow at Lund's jaw. Varn Allan ran toward Kenniston, as Lund struggled to get up.

"Get back, Kenniston!" she ordered him fiercely. "You're not on your barbaric world now. You can't—"

She had no chance to finish. Lund came up fast, drawing a small glass weapon from his pocket. He had foreseen Kenniston's reactions sufficiently this time to come armed. Gorr Holl's great furry shape loomed up behind the Sub-Administrator. One huge paw caught the hand with the weapon, the other arm went around Lund's body and lifted him in the air like a child.

His powerful fingers tightened. Lund dropped the glass weapon. "Let me go!" he gasped. "I order you—"

"You might have killed someone," Gorr Holl rumbled and shook Lund until his teeth rattled. "You have no orders for me, little man!" He looked around, still holding Lund. "What now?"

Arnol had come up. There was an iron set to his jaw now. "We are already liable to penalties for what we have done. Arrest and exile—they can't do much more to us if we go through with it. Are you still game?"

"Yes!" Kenniston looked at Varn Allan. He said regretfully, "I'm sorry you came. You'll have to go with us now—you and Lund."

Her eyes met his coldly, steadily. "It will do you no good. Our disappearance,

and yours, will be noticed very soon."

He shrugged. "Every hour counts."

She said nothing more. She glanced once at the flier and then at the men around her and at the fleet Magro. She did not try to escape.

Arnol had turned to face his crew. "Now you know the truth," he told them. "You are not responsible for my plans and you are not yet under penalty. Therefore you are free to decide now whether or not you will go with us."

The Chief Pilot stepped forward. He was a tall young man with a reckless grin and eyes that were not given to showing fear.

"I've sweated this tub across the galaxy too many times to quit now," he said. "I don't know about the other boys but I'm going."

The others, technicians and crewmen alike, shouted assent. "We've worked too long and too hard to throw this chance away! We're with you, Arnol!"

Arnol's dark eyes suffused with a mist that was very like the tears of gratitude. But his voice rang out like a bugle, crying,

"Then prepare for take-off! The Government ships will be after us as soon as Varn Allan and Lund are missed."

Men began to run toward the star-cruiser. Kenniston went with them, holding tight to Varn Allan, with Magro beside him and Gorr Holl coming after, the squirming protesting Lund clutched in his great arms.

The hatches were shut. The airlock valves clanged into place. As he followed Arnol along a narrow passageway Kenniston was aware of the swift ordered confusion that seethed throughout the ship.

Warning lights flashed on the bulkheads. Bells rang. Somewhere deep in the bowels of the cruiser machinery jarred into life, settling to a steady humming. Arnol thrust open two doors that faced each other across the passage.

Indicating one, he said, "I think this is the most comfortable, Administrator Allan. You'll understand if we keep the door locked."

She went inside without a word. Lund

was thrust into the opposite cabin. Arnol glanced at the warning lights. "All set," he said. "Come on."

In the cruiser, Kenniston sat dazedly through the last taut seconds of preparation, feeling all his weariness collapsing upon him. Then a bell rang and the little ship went smoothly skyward. There was no sensation of the tremendous acceleration, any more than the *Thanis*. He had already learned of the elastic force-stasis that gripped everything in a star-ship to eliminate acceleration pressure.

AS in a dream, Kenniston listened to the banshee scream of atmosphere past the outer hull. Then through the port he saw the great cloudy bulk of Vega Four falling away with slow majesty.

And then the sky was gone, replaced by the depthless black vault of space that was hung thick with loops and chains and pendants of blazing suns. He became aware later of Gorr Holl's big paws shaking him gently.

"Come on, Kenniston. You're nearly out. Time to sleep."

The big Capellan bore him away bodily to a cabin and rolled him into a bunk. He woke hours later, feeling rusty and still tired from the strain of the past days. He looked out. The cruiser was in deep space now, droning steadily across the mighty gulf that separated it from Earth.

Kenniston felt an involuntary leaping thrill. This voyaging in mighty interstellar deeps was getting into his blood. He stuck his head in the bridge and found Magro there with the Chief Pilot.

"I've been listening with the televisor operator," said the Spican. "There's been no alarm yet, back there."

"But there will be when they find Varn and Lund and us gone?"

"Yes. And Control ships will be after us like hounds. We're not going to have much time, on Earth."

Kenniston was silent. Then he asked, "Where's Arnol?"

"You'll find him down in the bomb compartment."

As Kenniston groped his way down a series of ladders into the compartment where the great bomb brooded in its well, that haunting doubt rose again within him.

Until now the swiftness of events had crowded it down. But now it seemed suddenly fantastic that he should pin the hopes of Earth's last people to this black thing. It had only been tested once and that test had ended disastrously.

But Jon Arnol sat there in the dim light and smiled a happy peaceful smile. "I have been admiring my child, Kenniston. That seems silly, doesn't it? But I've put most of my life into that thing. I've waited—how *long* I've waited! And now, in a little while."

His gaze dwelt fondly again upon the black metallic ovoid in its cradled pit. "It is a dream and it is half a lifetime of toil and it is a power that will revive a world."

Kenniston cried, out of his haunting doubt, "Can this bomb really rekindle Earth's interior heat? *How?*"

Arnol said a little helplessly, "I know the uncertainty that must oppress you. I'd like to explain my equations. But how can I without first teaching you all that the ages have brought in new science?"

He went on, "But even though a primitive scientist you are a scientist. I will try to make you understand the principle at least."

He asked, "You know that most suns derive their energy from a nuclear reaction that changes four hydrogen atoms into one helium atom by a series of shifting transmutations involving carbon and nitrogen?"

Kenniston nodded quickly. "Yes, that carbon-nitrogen cycle was discovered in my time. Scientists called it the Solar Phoenix. The tiny fraction of atomic weight left over, after the cycle, was the source of solar radiation."

"Exactly," said Arnol "What you wouldn't know is that scientists in the ages since then have succeeded in triggering similar cyclical reactions in other *heavier* elements. That is the key to my process.

"Most planets, like your Earth, have a central core of iron and nickel. Now a transformation of iron to nickel in cyclic reaction had been achieved in the laboratory, liberating much energy. I asked myself—instead of in a laboratory, why not start that reaction *inside a planet?*"

"Then it would reproduce the basic solar reaction inside such a planet?" Kenniston said incredulously.

"Not really, for the iron-nickel cycle does not yield such terrific radiation as your Solar Phoenix," Arnol corrected. "It would, however, create a giant solar furnace inside a planet and raise the surface temperature of that world by many degrees."

Kenniston voiced his worry. "There wouldn't be danger of the nuclear reaction bursting through to the surface?"

"It *can't* burst through," Arnol declared. "The cycle can only feed on nickel and iron and the massive outer sphere of silicon and aluminum around the core would contain the reaction forever."

He added, "That is why the energy-bomb that triggers the reaction must be detonated in the core. And *that* is why we can quickly start the process on your Earth—because the ancient heat-shafts there provide access to the deep core without elaborate preliminary boring."

KENNISTON nodded. The theory seemed sound enough. And yet—

He said slowly, "But when you tested it before, the planet was nearly destroyed by quakes that the convulsion in the core started."

"*Planetoid*," said Arnol wearily. "Not planet. Haven't I explained that enough times? The mass was insufficient to sustain the blast."

He was suddenly angry. "Why was I ever fool enough to accept that impossible test? But I repeat, Kenniston, I know what I am doing. The entire College of Science has not been able to find flaws in my equations. You'll have to be content with that."

"Yes," said Kenniston. "Yes, I'll have to be."

But as he left Arnol, he could not

entirely crush his apprehension. This man-made creation of a solar furnace in the heart of a planet was as monstrous to his mind as the making of fire must have been to the first man. What if, by his faith in Jon Arnal, he had doomed Earth instead of helping it?

One decision came clear in his mind. If there was a possibility that Earth's surface might be ravaged by destructive quakes no one should remain for the detonation of the bomb who did not do so of his own free will.

With a queer pang of guilt he thought of Varn Allan. She and Lund, prisoners against their will, would have to be let go before the great risk was taken. He would give her that reassurance at least.

The door of her cabin had a simple combination lock and the dial numbers had been given to all hands in case of necessity. Kenniston opened it and went in.

She was sitting rather as he had sat that time aboard the *Thanis*, her shoulders bent, her gaze brooding on the immensity of space beyond the port. He thought she had not slept from the lines of strain and weariness in her face.

She straightened up at once, and turned toward him defiantly. "Have you come to your senses and abandoned this criminal project?" she demanded.

The hard anger in her clear eyes awakened answering anger in Kenniston.

"We have not," he said. "I came only to tell you that you and Lund will be allowed to leave Earth before the thing is done."

"Do you think I'm worried about my own safety?" cried Varn Allan. "It's the thousands of your people, whom you're endangering by this mad defiance of Federation law."

"To the devil with Federation law."

Her eyes flashed hotly. "You'll learn its power. Control ships will speed to Earth before you can even do this thing."

Exasperated beyond measure he grabbed her shoulders with a brutal impulse to shake her. Then the totally unexpected happened. Varn Allan began to cry.

Kenniston's anger melted into distress. She had always seemed so cool and self-contained that it was upsetting to see her in tears.

After a moment he clumsily patted her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Varn. I know you were trying to help me there at Vega Center. And it must seem to you that I'm ungrateful."

"But I'm not! It's just that I *have* to try this thing or see Middletown's people break their hearts trying to fight your Federation."

She looked at him, wet-eyed and murmured, "I'm behaving like a fool."

He looked down at her, his hands still on her shoulders. His voice was suddenly a little husky. "Varn—"

She pushed him back, almost in panic. She avoided his eyes as she said, "I know you're sincere, Kenniston. But I know too that this thing is wrong, that you can't successfully defy the power of all the stars."

He was strangely depressed when he left her. He tried not to think about it—tried not to remember the touch of her, tried not to recognize the choking emotion that had leaped in him for a moment.

"That's just insane," he muttered to himself. "And there's Carol—"

He would not go to her again in all the hours and days that the little star-cruiser swept full speed across the galactic void. He was somehow afraid to see her once more.

A tension grew in Kenniston as the dim red spark of Sol largened to a sullen sphere. As the cruiser swept in at decelerating speed past the lifeless outer planets he looked ahead.

"We must work fast, once we're there," Jon Arnal was saying tautly. He too was showing the strain. "Already Federation ships must be on their way to stop us."

Kenniston made no answer. That cold, haunting doubt was a deeper shadow on him as he watched the gray globe of old Earth grow big ahead.

His people were there, waiting. What was he bringing to them and their dying planet? New life or final ultimate death?

CHAPTER XIII

Middletown Decides

WITH tightening nerves Kenniston walked across the dust and desolation of the plain toward the bright dome of New Middletown. Arnol was with him and big Gorr Holl. The cold wind was as he remembered it and the red lowering Sun with its crown of fire.

"Perfect," whispered Arnol. "*Perfect!* Such a world as I have dreamed of for a test!"

"Here they come," said Gorr Holl, and pointed to the portal.

The armed lookouts had recognized Kenniston and the big Capellan. Word had gone around and the folk of Middletown were pouring out through the portal to meet them. Within seconds the crowd was around them, shouting, all but trampling them in its excitement.

"What happened out there, Kenniston? What happened?"

"What's the verdict?"

"Are they going to let us be?"

From somewhere out of the swirling mob Carol came and flung her arms around him. "Thank God you've come back, Ken!"

He held her rather awkwardly and raised his voice to shout back to the wildly excited crowd. "Everybody—go to the plaza! Pass the word around. I'll tell you all about it, there."

"The plaza. The plaza!"

Some of them began to run back toward the city to cry the news through the streets. Others swarmed around Gorr Holl, glad to see him back. They stared curiously at Jon Arnol, demanding to know who he was, but Kenniston shook his head. The story would be hard enough to tell once. He was not going to do it twice.

He looked down at Carol then, a little at a loss for words. It had never been so before. It came to him that he had been away a long time. She was staring at him strangely.

"You've changed, Ken."

"I've had a lot on my mind," he told her. "I'm tired, that's all."

"No," she said. "It's more than that."

"We'll talk later, Carol. Please wait."

"Yes," she said and stepped away from him. "Yes, we can talk later."

In a moment he realized that she was no longer beside him. The crowd had swallowed her up. Mayor Garris hustled up to him at the portal, preceding Hubble and a few of the City Council.

"Did you fix things, Kenniston?" he cried. "Did you make them understand out there?"

Kenniston said, "I'd like to make my report in the plaza, where everyone can hear."

The Mayor gave him a worried, half-frightened look, and fell back. Kenniston reached out to take Hubble's hand. "I've got to talk to you, Hubble," he said. "I've done something and I don't know—"

He talked in a rapid undertone to the older scientist as they made their way through the streets.

HUBBLE'S reaction was the same as Kenniston's had been when the thing had been first broached to him. He recoiled from it, appalled. "Good God, Ken! It's mad—dangerous!"

But as he heard more his alarm changed to grave attention and then keenest interest. "Yet it does sound logical by every principle of our own physical science." He looked at Jon Arnol. "If I could only talk to him!"

"It wouldn't do you any good," said Kenniston grimly. "That's the awful part of it. His science is just a million years beyond us."

Hubble turned to Gorr Holl. He had worked beside the big furry Capellan. He knew and trusted his ability as an atomic technician. Haltingly, with the few words of the language he knew, he asked, "Will Arnol's process work?"

Gorr Holl answered simply, "I believe in it enough to risk my life helping try it."

Kenniston translated that. And Hubble seemed reassured.

"It still seems a great gamble, Ken. But I think it's worth it."

SOON Kenniston had mounted the steps of the building that was City Hall here, and stood by the microphone. Before him were the gathered thousands of Middletown—a kaleidoscope of eager faces, excited, waiting.

This was the moment he had dreaded—the moment he had thought he could not endure. And it was harder even than he had dreamed to say the words he must say. There was no use being gentle about it. He told them almost brutally.

"The decision is against us. They say we have to go."

He listened to the roar that broke out then, the angry cry of a people driven beyond their patience. Mayor Garris voiced the passionate reaction of all Middletown.

"We won't leave Earth! And if they want to push it to a fight they can!"

Kenniston raised his hands, begging for quiet. "Wait!" he shouted into the microphone. "Listen! You may not have to go and you may not have to fight. There's one chance—"

He told them, as simply and carefully as he could, of Jon Arnol's great proposed experiment. "Earth would be warm again—perhaps not quite as warm as before but warm enough so that you could live here comfortably for all time."

There was a long silence. He knew that the concept was too enormous for them to grasp at once. They were trying to grasp it, trying to equate it with some familiar thing. The planetary scale of it, their minds could not hold onto. They struggled for a personal significance they could understand.

Finally a man stepped forward, a rawboned, grizzled man who had spent a lifetime in the mills. "Does it mean, Mr. Kenniston, that we could go back then to Middletown?"

He answered, "Yes."

A cheer went up that shook the very walls of the buildings. "Back to Middletown! Did you hear that? We could go back to Middletown!"

Kenniston was touched. To them the shocking of a planet back to life meant primarily one thing—the ability to return to the drab little city beyond the

hills, the city that was still home.

He motioned them again for silence. "I have to warn you. This experiment has never been tried on a world like Earth. It's possible that it may fail. If it does the surface of the Earth may be wrecked by quakes."

That gave them pause. Kenniston saw the shadow of fear cross their faces, saw how they turned to one another and talked, and shook their heads, and looked anxiously back and forth.

Finally a voice cried, "What do you and Doctor Hubble think? You're scientists. What's your advice?"

Kenniston hesitated. Then he said slowly, "If I were alone on Earth I would try it. But I cannot advise you. You must make your own decision."

Hubble said into the microphone, "We can't advise you because we don't know ourselves. We are dealing here with the science of this future age, which is far beyond us. We can only take what their scientists tell us on faith."

"They say that the theory is entirely workable. We have warned you of the possibility of failure. It's up to you to decide how great the risk is and how much you are willing to gamble."

Kenniston turned and spoke to Mayor Garris. "Tell them to think it over carefully. Then call for a vote—those in favor of trying it to go to one side of the plaza, those against it to the other."

Aside to Hubble he said, "They should have months to decide a thing like this instead of minutes!"

Hubble said, "It may be just as well. They won't torture themselves with too much waiting and thinking."

Mayor Garris talked to the crowd. There was a deepening seething turmoil in the plaza then as people tried to reach others, to gather opinions from each other on what they ought to do. Scraps of heated conversation reached Kenniston's ears:

"These guys from outside have done pretty good so far, getting this city going again. They know what they're doing!"

"I don't know. Suppose it does bring on terrible quakes?"

"Listen, these people know their stuff! They'd have to live out there in the stars the way they do!"

"Yeah. And I'd rather sit through an earthquake than go kiting off to the Milky Way!"

At last Mayor Garris asked, "Are you ready for the vote?"

They were as ready as they would ever be. Kenniston watched, his heart pounding. And, beside him Jon Arnol watched also. Kenniston had explained the procedure to him. He knew what Arnol must be going through as he waited while his life's work weighed in the balance.

FOR a time the motion of the crowd was only a chaotic churning. Then gradually the separating motion came clear.

Those for the experiment to the right of the plaza.

Those against it to the left.

The channel between the two factions widened. And Kenniston saw that on the left were a scant two hundred people.

The vote was carried. The experiment was approved.

Kenniston's knees felt weak. He saw Arnol's face, moved almost to tears with relief and joy. He himself was conscious of a wild excitement—and yet even now he could not stifle all his fear.

They were committed now, he and Arnol and the rest. For life or death they were committed. He spoke again into the microphone.

"We must do this thing as soon as we can. We have very little time before ships of the Federation will arrive to stop us.

"You will please, all of you, prepare to leave the city at a moment's notice. As a precaution no one is to remain under the dome when the bomb is detonated.

"Those of you who voted against the experiment will be given a chance to leave Earth before it takes place. The star-cruiser can only take part of you, so it is suggested that you draw lots for space aboard her."

He swung to the Mayor. "Will you

take over now? Start the work of organizing the departure—we'll need every minute we've got!"

Hubble said, "I think we'd better let Jon Arnol see the shaft."

From then on New Middletown was a rushing surging swirl of activity. Arnol's technical crew came in from the ship. They studied the great heat-shaft with Gorr Holl and Magro and Arnol himself, while Kenniston and Hubble stood by and watched.

Finally Arnol said, "If we perform a miracle we can be ready by noon tomorrow."

Gorr Holl grinned his frightening grin at Kenniston. "Get ready to work!"

For what seemed an eternity Kenniston worked. Machinists and metalworkers of Middletown were called in, every available man and piece of equipment. Great loads were carried in from the ship. Hammers rang with a deafening clamor, shaping metal on improvised forges. Riveting machines gave out their staccato thunder.

And gradually, painfully, shaped out of the sweat and effort of their bodies, a scaffolding of steel girders rose above the mouth of the great shaft. Magro labored with the technicians over the complicated and delicate electrofuses and the timing devices and the radio-control that from a distance would drop and detonate the charge.

Kenniston had little time to think of anything but the work. Yet his mind reverted strangely often to Varn Allan, locked in her cabin aboard the cruiser, and he wondered what her thoughts were.

Then it occurred to him with something of a shock that he had not given a thought to Carol and her emotions.

Morning came. The city was to be cleared by noon and the men and women of Middletown were gathering their children in readiness. They would not take much out of the city with them. They would not need much either way.

The cryptic black ovoid was wheeled into position by the shaft. And with it were brought four small round objects of a different look.

"Capper-bombs, that we made in the ship's laboratory on the way here," explained Arnol. "They will drop an instant after the energy bomb, and will explode in the shaft just before it detonates below, sealing the shaft to prevent backlash."

Kenniston watched while the technicians set the capper bombs in their racks, one above the other, inside the frame of girders. The racks would be tripped by electronic relay from the remote control box.

Kenniston felt an increasing dread, as the fateful moment loomed close. His dread was for the trusting thousands of Middletown, who accepted the powers of scientists with the same unquestioning faith with which men had once accepted the powers of wizards. He hoped that if the experiment were a disastrous failure he would not survive to know it.

A crane had been rigged to handle the energy bomb. The electronics crew was working desperately to finish the intricate wiring of the rack-mechanisms, the split-second timing of the relays. One of the cantilever support-girders had flawed and steel-workers were sweating away to replace it.

A few more hours now and the thing would be done. By noon, or a little after they would know whether Earth was to live or die.

Then one of Arnol's men came running. He had run all the way from the star-cruiser. He was breathless, and his eyes were wild.

He cried out to Arnol, "A message on the televisior from a Control Squadron! They say they are approaching Earth and order us to cease operations at once!"

CHAPTER XIV

Appointment with Destiny

KENNISTON felt the impact of the news as a catastrophe crushing all their desperate hopes. He stood sagging, looking at the technicians who

stared frozenly back. Like an ominous echo Varn Allan's warning came back into his mind.

"You cannot fight Federation law!"

But Jon Arnol, raging at seeing the dream of a lifetime threatened at this last moment, rushed forward to the messenger. He grabbed the man's collar. "Did you think to use a distance gauge on the message from those ships?"

The man nodded hastily. "Yes. The readings were—"

"The devil with readings! How far from Earth are those ships?"

"I'd estimate that they're three or four hours away if they come at full speed."

"They'll come at full speed, don't worry," Arnol said grimly. His face was a sweating mask, the bones of it standing out gauntly as he turned to the others. "Can we be ready in time?"

"The rack-trip controls are in," answered a technician. "It'll take an hour or more to prepare the timers."

Kenniston had regained a little hope when he heard of the time-limit they faced. "Surely we can be ready in time, Arnol! I'll start them moving out the people at once!"

Mayor Bertram Garriss was not far away. Round-eyed and pale with worry, the pudgy Mayor had been watching their work around the great shaft. Kenniston ran to him.

"Get the people started out at once to the ridge of the hills. Only the sick and old to go in cars—the rest must walk. We can't risk a traffic tangle now!"

"Yes," gasped the Mayor. "Yes, right away." He caught Kenniston's arm, looking past him at the black ovoid bulk of the bomb.

As though ashamed to show the terror he felt, Garriss stammered, "How much danger is there, Kenniston?"

Kenniston gave him a reassuring shake. "Don't worry. Go along and get those people out of the city!" He wished he could find reassurance himself.

The next hours were nightmarish. Working under pressure, grudging every second, it seemed that everything conspired against them. The metal, the

mechanisms, the very tools seemed determined to betray them.

And yet at last the dark shape of the energy bomb swung in its rack over the mouth of the shaft. The last of the timers was set and it was done.

"Get your equipment ready," Kenniston told them tautly. "Let's go. There's still a lot to be done."

He went out with Hubble and Arnol and the rest. The city was as he had first seen it—empty, still, lifeless. The people had gone. As he passed out the portal he could see the dark, trailing mass of them already far across the plain, the thousands streaming slowly up the slope of the distant ridge.

Anxiously he scanned the sky. There was no sign yet of the Control Squadron.

Arnol sent his technical crew ahead to the ridge, with the remote control mechanisms and recording instruments. Gorr Holl and Magro and Hubble went with them. Then Kenniston and Arnol ran toward the star-cruiser.

There was a little knot of people standing beside it in the dust and cold—the Middletowners who were leaving Earth.

Kenniston stared at them in amazement. Out of the two hundred, only a score had actually come to the cruiser.

Arnol told them curtly, "You can come aboard now."

A few of them picked up their bundles and stood irresolutely glancing from their companions to Kenniston and back, wanting to speak and not knowing what to say. Then they turned and went aboard.

Kenniston counted. Two men, three women and a child.

"Well," he snapped at those who were left, "what are you waiting for? Get aboard!"

"I guess," said one man then stopped to clear his throat, "I guess I'd rather stay with all the rest."

He grabbed his bundle and started away, hurrying after the distant crowd. Another and another followed him until all were gone, a small hastening group in the immense desolation of the plain.

Arnol smiled. "Among your people, Kenniston, even the cowards are brave. It must be even harder in some ways for those who have decided to go."

They entered the cruiser and released Varn Allan and Norden Lund from their locked cabins. "My chief Pilot is about to take the ship off," Arnol told them. He could not restrain the flash of triumph in his eyes. "It seems that we have been able to defy Federation law!"

"You'll pay for it," said Lund. "If you live through this harebrained experiment, which I doubt, you'll pay for it!"

"Possibly. And now we must go."

He turned but Kenniston paused, looking at Varn Allan. And now he too wished to speak and could find no words.

ABRUPTLY he said, "I'm sorry things had to be this way, Varn. Good-by."

"Wait, Kenniston."

He stopped and she came up to him, pale and calm, her blue eyes steady on his face. "I'm staying here, Kenniston—on Earth."

He stared at her, dumb with astonishment. And he heard Norden Lund cry out, "Varn, are you mad? What are you thinking of?"

"I am thinking," she said slowly, "that these people, despite what they have done, are still within my jurisdiction. As Administrator I am responsible. I shall stay."

Lund said, "You're not thinking of the people, Varn. You're thinking of Kenniston."

She turned, as though to make furious reply. But she did not speak. She looked instead at Kenniston and her white strained face was a confession.

She went out of the ship. And Kenniston, following her, could not find any words for what was in his heart. With a soft humming, the star-cruiser mounted into the sky and was lost to view. The last dark trailing mass of people was disappearing over the ridge, as Kenniston and Varn Allan and Arnol started that way.

"Hurry!" urged Arnol. "Even yet we might be too late."

When they reached the ridge Gorr Holl and Magro and Hubble were waiting there with the young technicians and their apparatus. And Gorr Holl uttered a rumbling exclamation when he saw the girl.

"I thought you'd stay, Varn!"

She smiled at him, rather shakily. "How soon?" she asked.

"We're all set now," the big Capellan answered.

Kenniston saw that the radio control box and the panels of strange instruments were set up and ready. He glanced at Arnol. The scientist's face was filmed with sweat. All the color had gone from it and his hands shook. In this moment he was facing the climax of his whole life, all the years and the pain and the effort.

He said in a strangely toneless voice, "You'd better warn them, Kenniston. Now."

Below them, on the far slope of the ridge, waited the thousands of Middletown's people. Kenniston went down toward them. He cried out to them and his voice carried thin and unreal on the chill wind across the dead rocks and the dust.

"Keep down behind the ridge! Pass the word to keep down! We're going to blow it!"

They looked toward him, all the massed white faces pale in the dim light of the Sun—the dying Sun that watched them with its red uncaring eye.

A great silence fell upon them. By ones and twos, and then by hundreds they knelt to pray. And others, by the hundreds, stood unmoving and unspeak-

ing, looking solemnly upward to the crest of the ridge. Here and there a child began to cry.

Slowly, gripped as in a strange and fateful dream, Kenniston mounted again to where Arnol and the others stood. Far beyond them he saw the dome of the city, still glowing with light as they had left it, lonely in the vast barrenness of the plain.

He thought of the black thing waiting alone in the city to make its nightmare plunge and a deep tremor shook him. He reached out and took Varn Allan's hand and drew her to him.

In that last minute before Arnol's fingers pressed the final pattern on the control board Varn Allan looked past Kenniston, down at the silent waiting thousands who were the last of all the races of old Earth.

"I see now," she whispered, "that in spite of all we have gained since your day we have lost something too. A courage, a blind brave something—I'm glad I stayed!"

Arnol drew a sharp and painful breath. "It is done," he said.

For a long eternal moment the dead Earth lay unstirring. Then Kenniston felt the ridge leap under his feet—once, twice, four times. The sharp grinding shocks of the capper bombs, sealing the great shaft. Arnol watched the quivering needles of the dials. He had ceased trembling. It was too late for anything, even emotion.

DEEP, deep within the buried core of the Earth a tremor was born,

[Turn page]

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a dilating shudder that came slowly upward to the barren rocks and touched them and was gone. It was as though a dead heart had suddenly started to beat again—to beat strongly, exultantly, a planet reborn.

The pointers on the panel of dials had gone quite mad. Gradually they quivered back to normal—all but one row of them, at which Arnol and his crew stared with superhuman intensity.

Kenniston could bear the terrible silence no longer. "Has it—" His voice trailed away in hoarseness.

Arnol turned very slowly toward him. He said as though it were difficult for him to speak. "Yes. The reaction is begun. There is a great flame of warmth and life inside Earth now. It will take weeks for that warmth and life to creep up to the surface but it will come."

He turned his back then on Kenniston, on all of them. What he had to say was for the tired waiting young men who had labored with him so long.

He said to them, "We had an appointment with destiny on this little Earth. Here, long ago, one of our savage ancestors kindled wood to warm him. Now we have kindled a world. And there are all the others, all the cold dying worlds out there."

Kenniston heard no more. A babel had broken loose. Varn Allan was clinging to him and Gorr Holl was shouting deafeningly and he heard the stammering questions of Mayor Garris and Hubble's shaking voice. Over all came the surge of thousands of feet. The thousands of Middletown were coming up the slope, scrambling, running, a life-or-death question in their white faces.

"Tell them, Ken," said Hubble, his voice thick.

Kenniston stood upon the ridge and the crowd below froze tensely silent as he shouted down to them, "It has succeeded! All danger is over, and in weeks the heat of the core will begin to reach the surface."

He stopped. These were not the words that could reach their hearts. Then he found those words and called them to the thousands. "It has been chill winter

on Earth for a million years. But now soon spring is coming back to Earth—*spring!*"

* * * * *

Slowly, slowly, during all these weeks the spring had come. It was not the spring of old Earth but every day the wind blew warmer and now at last the first blades of grass were pushing upward, touching the other plains with green.

And now once more across the ridge the cars and trucks and buses rolled—the ancient jalopies, the shining station wagons, the family sedans and the lumbering Diesels, down along the slope into the streets of old Middletown. Many had chosen to remain in the domed city, but to these thousands only the drab old town was home.

Kenniston drove in that caravan, taking Carol and her aunt home.

All along the familiar streets houses were coming to life. Shutters flung open, storm windows raised, doors standing wide to the soft wind, women busy with brooms on dust-drifted porches. The shrill voices of children and barking of dogs mingled with the joyous impatience of the auto horns.

Down Mill Street to Main Street and on. And at last the old gray house, just as they had left it. Kenniston stopped the jeep at the curb. Mrs. Adams got out. She went slowly up the steps and unlocked the door. She stood for a moment, looking in.

"Nothing is changed," she whispered. "But all this dust! I'll have to clean—" Suddenly she sat down in her chair by the window and began to cry.

Carol did not go in at once. Feeling an odd sense of strain Kenniston asked her, "Are you happy, Carol?"

She nodded, half smiling, looking out along the awakening street. "You'll be going back now, Ken?"

"Yes. Arnol and his crew are leaving today and I want to see them off."

"They're all right now, aren't they? I mean, they're not in trouble any more?"

"No," said Kenniston. "The special court that tried us all here gave us all

the same sentence, and then suspended it. They couldn't very well do otherwise since the Arnol process is going to do so much good on so many other worlds."

"I'm glad," she said.

He turned to go. "I'll be back soon," he assured her.

SHE told him, "No, Ken. Don't come back to me."

He looked at her, astonished. "Carol, what do you mean?"

Her soft face was quite steady. "I mean, that you don't altogether belong here now, Ken. You changed when you went out there. You'll change more in the days ahead—will turn toward the strange new life."

She added, "And I can't change—not like that. You'd be miserable with me, clinging to the old things."

He knew she spoke the truth and yet he must protest. "But the plans we made together, Carol—"

She shook her head. "I made those plans with another man, a man who isn't quite here any more and won't ever be here again."

She reached up and kissed him and then she went inside and closed the door.

Kenniston stood a moment, hesitating. Then, slowly, he climbed back into the jeep and drove out of Middletown.

From the hills he could see the many

star-ships that now rested on the plain by the domed city. And the city itself still lived. It was the younger folk of Middletown who had chosen to stay in it—the young who could still look forward to the new.

The star-ships would continue to come now that Earth was habitable again. The people of far stars would mingle with the people of Middletown and the young men would go out to other Suns and gradually the whole strange story of Middletown would be absorbed into the stream of history.

Kenniston sent the jeep speeding toward the group that was at the little star-cruiser with Arnold—Gorr Holl, and Margo and Varn Allan. He felt now a sense of new freedom and a deep gratitude toward Carol, who had not tried to hold him back.

But too he felt an uncertainty, a shrinking. Vast new horizons stretched before him, the boundless horizons of space, the endless avenues of new thought. He was still a child of older Earth and it would be strange and lonely.

But as he drove closer to them, as he looked past the others into Varn Allan's shining eyes, he knew suddenly that he was wrong and that in all the strangeness of the years to come he would not be alone.

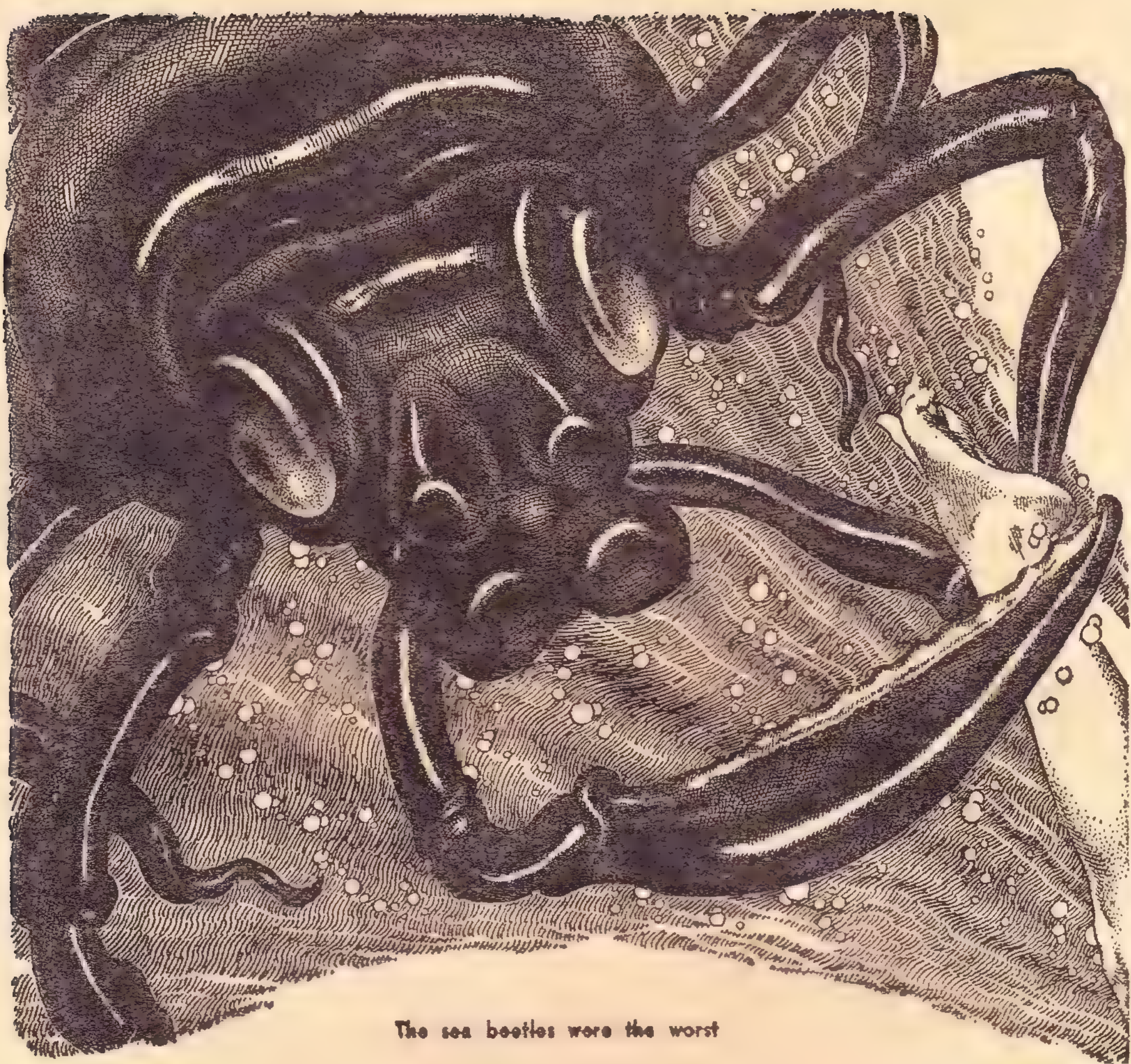


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The sea beetles were the worst

The Spa of the Stars

JOE BLAINE sat, limp as a pillow, in his swivel chair, chewing morbidly at a dead cigar. The desk supported his feet. He stroked his pink jowl with a hand that was all flesh and no bone. His mood was one of gloom.

Many extremes had enlivened Joe Blaine's life: triumphs, failures, vicissitudes of many sorts. But never such an abysmal piece of cheese as the Spa of the Stars.

Outside, the white sun Eta Pisces

shone with a tingling radiance on a landscape sparkling white, blue and green. ("Enjoy the zestful light of the Cluster's healthiest sun in surroundings of inexpressible beauty"—excerpt from the Spa's brochure.)

A lazy sea folded surf along a beach of pure sand behind which a wall of jungle rose four hundred feet, steep as a cliff. ("Vacation at the edge of unexplored jungle mysteries," read the brochure, and the illustration showed a

A Magnus Ridolph story by JACK VANCE

Trouble-shooter Magnus tackles the woes of a smart hotel resort which is losing guests to dragons, sea beetles, gorillas and flying snakes!

lovely nude woman with apple-green skin standing under a tree blazing with red and black flowers.)

A big hotel, miles of beach, a hundred orange and green cabanas, an open-air dance pavilion, a theater, tennis courts, sail boats, an arcade of expensive shops, a race-track with grandstand and stables—this was the Spa of the Stars just as Joe Blaine had conceived it. Nothing was lacking but the nude green woman.

If Joe Blaine had known where to get one, she'd have been there too.

There was another discrepancy. Joe had envisioned the lobby full of stylish women, the beach covered with bronze flesh. In his mind's-eye he had seen the grandstand black with sportsmen, all anxious to dispute the wisdom of the odds he had set. Each of the seven bars—as he had pictured them—were lined three deep, with the bartenders sweat-



ing and complaining of overwork. . . . Joe Blaine grunted and threw his cigar out the window.

THE door split back and Mayla, his secretary, entered. Her hair was bright as the sands of the beach; she had eyes blue as the sea before it toppled to surf. She was slender, flexible, and her flesh had the compelling, clutchable look of a marshmallow. She was a creature of instinct, rather than intellect, and this suited Joe Blaine very well. Crossing the room, she patted the pink spot on his scalp.

"Cheer up, Joe, it can't be that bad."

The words catalyzed Joe's smouldering dejection to an angry bray.

"How could it be worse? You tell me. . . . Ten million munits sunk into the place and three paying guests!"

Mayla settled herself into a chair, thoughtfully puffed alight a cigarette.

"Just wait till the noise of those accidents dies down. . . . They'll be back like flies. After all, we got a lot of publicity—"

"Publicity! *Huh!* Nine bathers killed by sea-beetles the first day. The gorilla-things dragging those girls into the jungle. Not to mention the flying snakes and the dragons— Lord, the dragons! And you talk about publicity!"

Mayla pursed her lips. "Well—maybe you're right. I suppose it would look bad to somebody who didn't know the circumstances."

"What circumstances?"

"I mean about Kolama being a wild planet, and not explored or civilized."

"You think, then," said Blaine with great earnestness, "that people don't mind being chewed up by horrible creatures so long as it's out on a wild planet?"

She shook her head. "No, not that exactly—"

"Good," said Joe. "I'm relieved."

"—I just mean that maybe they'd make a few allowances."

Blaine threw up his hands and sank back in an attitude of defeat. He reached for a new cigar and lit it.

"Maybe," said Mayla after a short

pause, "we could advertise it like a big game lodge, and people would come for excitement."

He reproached her with a glance. "You ought to know that nobody hunts big game—or any kind of game—if there's a chance of *them* getting hurt. The odds are even out here; that'll keep away the jokers after cheap blood. . . ."

The telescreen buzzed. Joe turned impatiently. "Now what. . . ." He snapped the switch. The screen glowed pink. "Long distance, looks like."

"Starport calling Joe Blaine," came the operator's voice.

"Speaking."

On the screen appeared a narrow face—all eyes, nose and teeth, a face that was crafty and calculating, and yet possessed of a quality that women thought attractive. This was Blaine's partner, Lucky Woolrich.

"Now what the devil do you want?" demanded Joe. "Do you know it costs eight munits a minute interplanet?"

Lucky said curtly, "Just wanted to find out if you've got it licked."

"Licked!" yelled Joe. "Are you crazy? I'm scared to set foot outside the hotel!"

"We've got to do something," Woolrich told him. "Ten million munits is an awful swipe of scratch!"

"We sure agree there."

"I don't get it," said Lucky. "The place got built without accidents. Nothing bothered us until we started to operate. Don't that seem fishy to you?"

"Fishy as all get out. I can't figure it. I've tried."

Lucky said, "Well, I called mainly to tell you I'm coming on out. Ought to be there in four days or so. I'm bringing a trouble-shooter—"

"We don't need a trouble-shooter," snapped Blaine. "We need a dragon-shooter and a water-beetle shooter and a flying-snake shooter. Lots of 'em."

Lucky ignored the comment. "I've got the man to help us out if anyone can. He's highly recommended. Magnus Ridolph. A well-known genius. Invented the musical kaleidoscope."

"That's the ticket," said Blaine. "We'll dance 'em to death."

"Lay off the comics, Joe!" rasped Lucky. "Eight munits a minute is cheap when we're talking business; for jokes it's extravagant."

"I might as well have some fun for my money," said Blaine peevishly. "Ten million munits and every cent buying headaches."

"See you in four days," said Lucky coldly. The screen went dull.

Joe stood up, walked back and forth. Mayla watched with proud possessiveness. She, who could have had forty-nine out of any fifty men, thought Joe was the cutest thing she'd ever seen.

A tall angular man in the red and blue uniform of the Spa came bounding into the office, knees raising as high as his chin with every step.

"Well, Wilbur?" snapped Blaine.

"Golly, Joe—you know that little old deaf lady? The cranky one?"

"Of course I know her. I know every one of our three guests. What about her?"

"One of them dragons just now came at her. Would have got her too if she hadn't ducked under a bench. Just swung down out of the sky, big as a house. Lordy, she's spittin' mad! Says she's gonna sue you, because the thing dove at her on hotel property."

Joe Blaine pulled at his scant hair, turned his cigar up between clenched teeth. "Give me strength, give me strength..."

"How about a drink?" Mayla suggested.

Wilbur concurred. "Mix one for me too."

SEEN in the flesh, Lucky was not as tall as he looked on the telescreen—hardly as tall as Joe, but thinner, neater.

"Joe," he said, "meet Mr. Ridolph. He's the expert I was telling you about." Lucky waved an arm at the slight man with the distinguished white beard who had wandered abstractedly into the lobby, looking here and there, in all directions, like a child on a circus midway.

Blaine took one look, eyed Lucky in disgust.

"Expert? That old goat? On what?"

he muttered. Aloud, with effusive cordiality: "How do you do, Mr. Ridolph? So glad you could come to help. We sure need an expert out here to figure out our problems."

Magnus Ridolph shook hands fastidiously. "Yes," he said. "How do you do, Mr. Woolrich?"

"I'm Woolrich," said Lucky briskly. "This is Mr. Blaine."

"How do you do?" And Magnus Ridolph nodded, to assure them that he took the correction in good part. "You have a pleasant resort, very peaceful and quiet, just as I like it."

Blaine rolled his eyes upwards. "It's not peaceful and I don't like it quiet."

Lucky laughed, slapped Magnus Ridolph across his skinny shoulder-blades. Magnus Ridolph turned, gave Lucky a cold stare.

"Don't let him throw you, Joe," said Lucky. "That's just an act he puts on for the customers. He's as shrewd as they come."

Joe eyed Magnus Ridolph like a housewife turning down a piece of meat at the butcher shop, then turned away and shook his head. He stiffened. A sudden grinding explosion of sound outside, a savage howling...

Lucky and Joe exchanged glances and ran for the door. High in the sky, almost overhead, two tremendous shapes flapped and tore at each other with fangs like hay-hooks. Drifting down came a roaring and fierce yelling. Blaine reached out, took Magnus Ridolph's elbow.

"There's thousands of 'em!" he yelled into Magnus Ridolph's ear, "just waiting for somebody to set foot out on the beach. We got to get rid of them! Also the twenty-foot pincer-beetles that infest the ocean, and some half-ton gorillas that got a lot of human tendencies. Not to mention the flying snakes."

"They certainly seem a ferocious set of creatures," said Magnus Ridolph mildly.

The battle in the sky took a sudden lurch in their direction, and the three spectators jerked back involuntarily.

"Shoo!" yelled Joe. "Get outa here!"

A spatter of blood began to fall like rain. Talons ripped, yanked—brought a tooth-grinding screech. One of the forms toppled, started to fall with a tremendous slow majesty.

Lucky gave a strangling cry. Joe yelled, "No, no, no—"

End over end came the torn body, almost at their heads. It fell through the roof of the hotel, into the dining room. Glass sprayed a hundred feet in all directions. A convulsive flap of the wings made further destruction. And now the victor swooped on vast leather pinions. It dropped hissing into the wreckage, began to tear at the flesh.

Joe cried in wordless anguish. Lucky turned, ran to the desk, returned with a grenade rifle.

"I'll show that overgrown lizard something." He sighted, pulled the trigger. Fragments of dragon and hotel spattered across the beach.

There was a sudden heavy silence. Then Blaine said in a crushed voice: "This is it. We're through."

Magnus Ridolph cleared his throat mildly. "Perhaps the situation is not as bad as you think."

"What's the use? We made a mistake. Kolama is just too tough. We might as well face it, take our loss."

"Now Joe," said Lucky, "brace up. Maybe it's not so bad after all. Mr. Ridolph thinks we got a chance."

Joe snorted.

"Couldn't you post guards in copters, and kill any that came down?" suggested Magnus Ridolph.

Blaine shook his head. "They fly high, drop down like hawks. I've watched 'em. We couldn't keep 'em all out. And one or two would be as bad for business as a hundred."

Lucky pulled at his lip. "What I want to know is how come we never had trouble while the place was going up."

Joe shook his head. "Beats me. Seems like when the Mollies were around, nothing ever bothered us. As soon as they took off our grief began."

Magnus Ridolph glanced inquiringly

at Lucky. "Mollies? And what are they?"

"That's what Joe calls the natives," Lucky told him. "They helped us out while we were building."

"Did the excavating," said Joe.

"Possibly you could keep natives here and there around the property," suggested Magnus Ridolph.

Blaine shook his head. "Nobody could stand the stink. It must be the stink that keeps the beasts away. God knows I don't blame 'em."

Magnus Ridolph considered the theory. "Well, possibly, if the odor were extremely strong and pungent."

"It's not anything else."

Magnus Ridolph stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Just what sort of creatures are these—'Mollies'?"

"Well," said Joe, "think of a shrimp four feet tall, walking around on little stumpy legs. A sort of a fat gray shrimp with big stary eyes. That's a Molly for you."

"Are they intelligent? Do you have any contact with them?"

"Oh, I guess you'd call 'em intelligent. They live in big hives back in the jungle. Don't do any harm, and they helped us out quite a bit. We paid 'em in pots, pans, knives."

"How did you communicate with them?"

"They got a language of squeaks." Joe pursed up his lips. "*Squeak—squick, squick.*" He cleared his throat. "That means 'come here.'"

"Hm," said Magnus Ridolph. "And how do you say 'go away'?"

"*Squick—keek, keek.*"

"Hm."

"*Squeak, keek, keek, keek*—that means 'time to knock off for the day.' I learned that lingo pretty good."

"And you say the wild beasts never bothered them?"

"Nope. Only twice did anything even come near. Once a gorilla, once a dragon."

"And then?"

"They all stood still looking, as if asking themselves, now just what does this johnny think *he's* doing? And the gorilla and the dragon both turned

'round and took off." Joe shook his head. "Must have got a close whiff of them. Like skunk and sewage and half a dozen tannery vats. I had to wear a mask."

Woolrich said, "We've got movies of everything, if you think there's anything to it."

Magnus Ridolph nodded gravely. "They might be useful. I'd like to see them."

"This way," said Joe. He added glumly: "You can see them, but you can't smell them."

"Just as well," said Lucky.

The first scene showed virgin territory—the beach, the blue ocean, the sharp cliff of the jungle. On the beach sat the small prospect ship, and beside it stood Joe, self-consciously waving at the camera.

The second scene showed the Mollies excavating foundations. They worked in a crouched position with heads extended, and the sand exploded out of the trench ahead of them. They were rather more manlike than Joe had described them—gray whiskered creatures with soft segmented bodies. They had bulging pink blind-looking eyes, horny bowed legs, a concave area around their mouth.

Magnus Ridolph leaned forward. "They have a peculiar method of digging."

"Yeah," said Blaine. "It's fast though. They blow it out."

Magnus Ridolph moved in his seat. "Run that again, please."

With a tired sigh and a helpless glance at Lucky, Joe complied. Once again they watched the crouched natives, saw the sand broken loose, thrown up and out of the ditch as if by a strong jet of air.

Magnus Ridolph sat back in his seat. "Interesting."

The scene changed. The concrete slab had been poured. A dozen natives were carrying a length of timber.

"Hear 'em talking? Listen. . . ." And Joe turned the volume control. They heard rising and falling eddies of shrill noise.

"Squeak—squeeeek!" came a peremptory sound.

"That's me," said Joe, "telling them

to look up and pose for the pictures."

There was a general turning of the conical whiskered heads.

"Keek, keek, keek," said the speaker.

"That's 'back to work,'" said Blaine. A few minutes later: "Here's where the dragon goes after them. . . . They saw it first. See? They're excited. . . . Then I saw it." The view swept up in the sky, showed the bottle-shaped body circling down on wings that seemed to reach across the horizon. The picture jerked, quivered, blurred, and suddenly showed the scene from a crazy angle, the view obscured by blades of grass.

"That's where I—put the camera down," said Joe. "Listen to those Mollies. . . ." And the speaker shrilled with the sound. It rose in pitch, high up through the scale, died.

"Now they're just looking at him—and now the dragon catches a whiff and man! he says, none of that for me, I'd rather chew bark off of the big trees, and he's away."

THE view shifted from the odd angle, resumed its normal perspective. The dragon became a blurring dot in the sky.

"The next scene is where the gorilla comes at 'em. . . . There he is." The watchers saw a tall anthropoid with sparse brown fur, red eyes the size of saucers, a row of gland-like sacs dangling under his chin. He dropped out of a tree, came lurching toward the natives, roaring vastly. Again came the shrill squealing, gradually rising and dying, and the silent stare. The gorilla turned, flung his hands in an almost comical gesture of disgust and hurried away.

"Whatever it is," observed Lucky, "it's good."

Magnus Ridolph said reflectively, "Extremely disagreeable, those beasts."

"Humph," snorted Joe. "You haven't seen the sea-beetles yet."

Magnus Ridolph rose to his feet. "I think I've seen enough for tonight. If you'll excuse me, I think I'll try to get a little rest."

"Sure," said Lucky abstractedly. "Wilbur will show you your room."

"Thank you." Magnus Ridolph left the room.

"Well," said Blaine heavily, "there goes your great detective."

"Now Joe," said Mayla, looping an arm around his neck, "don't be mean. I think he's sort of cute. So prim and tidy-like. And that little white beard, isn't it a scream?"

"Magnus Ridolph's got brains," said Lucky, without conviction.

"He looks like an old faker to me," said Joe. "Notice how he jumped when the gorilla dropped out of the tree? Cowardly old goat..."

"Excuse me," said Magnus Ridolph, "may I have that film? I'd like to study it under a viewer."

There was a pause.

"Ah—help yourself," said Woolrich.

Magnus Ridolph removed the cart-ridge. "Thank you very much. Good night."

Joe watched the door close. Then he turned and blurted, "Lucky, I always thought you had sense. When you said you were bringing out an expert, I had faith in you. Look at him. Senile. A pussy-footer..."

"Now Joe," said Mayla, "don't be hasty now. Remember you thought I was dumb once too; remember? You told me so yourself."

"Ah-h-h-h," breathed Joe. "For two cents I'd—"

"Ten million munits," warned Lucky. "Lotsa scratch!"

Blaine pulled himself up in his chair. "You know what I'm gonna do?"

"What?"

"I'm going out to that Mollie hive. I'm going to find out what gives 'em that stink. Whatever it is, we can have it analyzed and maybe treated so that it won't be so vile."

Maryla said, "Honey, do you think it's safe?"

Lucky said, "Do you really think that's what does the trick?"

"Think'?" scoffed Joe. "I *know* it."

Joe's jungle suit was the best money could buy. The metallic fabric mirrored away the sun-glare. The plastic bubble surrounding his head was similarly sil-

vered on top. The boots fitted his feet as comfortably as his own skin. By twisting a valve he could inflate vanes that would enable him to walk across swamp and ooze without sinking. A small pack on his back pumped cool clean air around him, supplied power for the sound pick-up, the torch and power-knife at his belt. His pouch contained concentrated food for three days and an air mattress of material so tough and thin that when deflated it could be crumpled up inside his clenched fist. He carried a grenade rifle and a dozen extra clips of ammunition.

Early in the morning he set off, before Magnus Ridolph had arisen. Lucky watched him go with unconcern. The Lord protects fools and drunkards, thought Lucky; Joe was doubly secure. Mayla was not so impassive, and finally Lucky had to hold her until Joe was out of sight. Her cries followed him as he trudged across the sand toward the beetling rampart of vegetation. He found a trail and plunged into the green gloom.

As soon as the forest surrounded him, he halted to take stock. The flying snakes could knock him down and constrict, though the fabric of the suit would protect him from their teeth. He turned his eyes apprehensively into the air. Somehow the expedition seemed less urgent now than it had the previous evening. Magnus Ridolph—there was the man who should be investigating the natives. He was being paid for it! Joe chewed on his pink tongue. No, he couldn't very well go back now. Lucky would never let him forget it.

ONCE more he searched the fronds and foliage, golden-green where the light struck, dark rich green in the shadow. Moths flitted across the open spaces, in and out of the slanting beams of sunlight. Up, up, up—big green leaves, clots of red, yellow and black flowers, trailing chalk-blue vines. A snake could just about pick his time, thought Joe. A gorilla now, would make a noise crashing through the brush. Hm, Blaine thought, noise. He dialled up the power on his head phone until he could

hear the hum of the insects. The crash of each of his footsteps was like a tree falling.

He continued, more at ease. The thrum of the snake's short wings should reach him long before the snake.

The trail wound without apparent direction here and there around the giant boles and up and down slopes. Joe became confused almost at once. Twice he heard the throb of wings and once a far thrashing, but he progressed a mile before he was molested. It was a gorilla.

Joe heard the snapping and grunting as it climbed through the trees, then silence as it sighted him. There was a sliding sound, not too stealthy, as if the gorilla were confident. He glimpsed the mottled hide, aimed. He stopped in time. Golly! the amplifier!

He turned it down. The sound would have beat a hole into his head. He aimed again, pulled the trigger. A section of the jungle became a globe of empty space, with seared, bruised boundaries.

Joe turned the volume of the amplifier back up and continued. He walked three hours, killing five snakes with his torch and two more gorillas. At times he had to turn loose his power-knife, so thick was the tangle of shoots and vines. And after three hours the jungle looked no different from the jungle where he had set out.

Thud, thud, thud, sounded in his ear. Blaine stood still, waited. The Molly appeared, halted, looked at him with blind-looking pink eyes. Blaine could see no expression or sign of surprise.

"Skeek," said Joe. "Hello."

"Keek, keek," returned the native. It stepped around Blaine, continued down the path. Joe shrugged, moved on.

A moment later he broke out into a clearing a hundred yards wide. In the center, a conical gray mound built of woven twigs and plastered with mud like a wasp's nest, rose an amazing two hundred feet. It had been built around a living tree; from the apex the trunk extended and held an umbrella of foliage out into the sunlight.

Joe Blaine halted. The five hundred Mollies ambling around the clearing paid

him no heed. And Joe had no interest in their simple occupations other than the source of the stench. Cautiously he opened the gate in his head-dome. He reeled, slammed it shut, eyes swimming. An odor so ripe, so putrid, so violently strong, it seemed impossible that the air could remain clear.

Where did it come from?

Across the clearing he glimpsed a depression, a wallow, where several dozen Mollies lay, moving languidly. Blaine approached, watched. A dozen Mollies appeared from the shadows of the forest, bearing crude baskets. About half held pulpy black balls; others, gray-green slugs six inches long; others, pink cylinders that looked as if they were cut from watermelon hearts.

The Mollies turned the baskets over into the wallow. Then they stood back, looked intently at the piles. And the black balls burst, the green slugs melted, the red cylinders spread out like oil. A moment later they were a mixture homogeneous with the rest of the wallow.

So, thought Joe, here it is. Food and chemical warfare from the same trough. He went to the depression, inspected it. The occupants gave him no heed. He dipped a quantity of the thick green-black ooze into a jar, sealed it. This would be enough for a test. Fast work, he thought. Now back to the hotel.

He looked across the clearing—stared. Through a gap in the trees gleamed a patch of brilliant white and, beyond, a bright blue. Could it be . . . He crossed the clearing, looked through the gap. It was the beach, the ocean. A half-mile to his right the hotel rose. Joe beat his head-dome with furious fists. Three hours of plodding through the jungle!

Blaine found Woolrich in the office. Lucky looked up in surprise.

"Hello. Didn't expect you back so soon." He wrinkled his nose. "You don't smell so good, Joe."

"I got it," Blaine said. "Here it is, the real magoo. If that don't keep them away, my name's not Joe Blaine."

"Get it out of here," said Lucky in a stifled voice. "I can smell it through the bottle."

"Must have got some on the outside," said Blaine. And he told Lucky his adventures.

Lucky's thin face still looked skeptical. "And now?"

"Now we test the stuff. One of us paints himself with it, wanders around the beach. The other stands guard with a grenade-rifle, just in case. If the dragons come down, and shy off, we'll know for sure."

Lucky tapped his fingers on the desk. "Sounds good. Well," he said carelessly, "since you already got some of the stuff on you, you might as well be the decoy."

Joe stared unbelievably. "Are you crazy, Lucky? I got to run the camera. You know that. It's got to be you."

AFTER a half-hour's debate, they finally selected Magnus Ridolph to serve as the guinea pig.

"He won't like it," said Woolrich doubtfully.

"He's got to like it. What are we paying him for? He hasn't turned a hand so far. He ought to be glad we've solved the problem for him."

"He might not see it that way."

Joe opened a drawer in the desk, pulled out a metal can.

"See this? It's a somnol spray, to be used on drunks and roughnecks. We'll give him a dose, and he won't even know what's happening. Where is he now?"

"In the engine room. He's been puttering around all morning, working on the lathe."

Blaine sneered. "Now, isn't that the limit? He's supposed to be the brains, the trouble-shooter, and he leaves it to us. Well, we'll fix that. He'll earn his money, whether he wants to or not."

Lucky reluctantly rose to his feet. "Maybe if we asked him—"

"Better this way," said Joe. "It's not as if there's any danger. We know the stuff works. Don't the Mollies run around scot-free? And besides we'll be standing right there with guns."

They found Magnus Ridolph in the work-shop, polishing a metal tube with a piece of crocus cloth. As they entered

he looked up, nodded, and fitted the tube through a hole in a metal cup. He coupled a hose to the tube, set the apparatus in a jig, turned a valve. There came a hiss of air, a thin blowing sound.

Magnus Ridolph gazed at the pattern on an oscillograph. "Hm," he muttered. "That's about right, I should say."

"What are you doing, Mr. Ridolph?" asked Blaine jocularly, one hand close behind his back.

Magnus Ridolph gave him a cool glance, then returned to his apparatus and detached it from the jig.

"I'm refining a certain musical principle . . ."

S-s-s-s, went the somnol bomb. A fine mist surrounded Magnus Ridolph's distinguished head. He gasped, stiffened, slumped.

"Did you hear him, Lucky?" Joe kicked at the metal tube Magnus Ridolph still clutched in his hand. "Fooling around with music, when we're in a jam."

Lucky said, "I guess that musical kaleidoscope sort of went to his head. He used to be a good man, so I've heard."

"You must have heard wrong," said Joe. "Well, let's take him out on the beach. Here's a wheelbarrow. That should do the trick."

They trundled the supine body out into the white blaze of the sun, two hundred yards down the beach.

"This is far enough," said Blaine. "Let's douse him and get back under the trees. It makes me nervous, being in the open like this. Those dragons are like flies this time of day."

They lifted Magnus Ridolph from the wheelbarrow, stretched him on the sand, and Joe poured the black liquid liberally across his chest.

"Gad!" coughed Lucky. "It even comes upwind!"

"She's rich," said Joe complacently. "When I go after something, I get it. Now come on, let's get out of the way. Hurry up, there's a dragon out there now."

They ran up to the edge of the jungle and waited. The speck low on the horizon expanded, became a flapping monster.

Joe held his rifle ready.

"Just in case," he told Lucky.

The dragon bulked large in the sky. It saw Magnus Ridolph's prone figure, circled.

Lucky said, "Golly, I just thought of something!"

"What?" snapped Joe.

"If that stuff doesn't work, we won't know until the dragon's pretty close. And then—"

"Rats!" said Joe bluffly. "It'll work. It's got to."

The dragon made a sudden swoop to the beach, waddled forward.

Twenty yards— "It don't faze him!" cried Lucky.

Ten yards. Blaine raised the gun, lowered it again.

"Shoot, Joe, for Pete's sake, shoot!"

"I can't!" cried Blaine. "I'll blow Ridolph to pieces!"

Lucky Woolrich ran out on the beach, yelled, jumped up and down. The dragon paid no heed.

Five yards. Magnus Ridolph stirred. Perhaps the odor of the black liquid had aroused him, perhaps some sensation of danger. He shook his head, propped himself on his elbow.

It was a rude awakening for Magnus Ridolph. Eye to eye he stared at the dragon.

The dragon opened its maw, darted its head forward, snapped. Magnus Ridolph rolled over, escaped by an inch.

Blaine shook his head. "That stuff doesn't work at all!"

The dragon made a quick hop, darted its head forward again. Magnus Ridolph again stumbled back, and the fangs clanged past his ribs. He still clutched his metal tube. He frantically put it to his lips, puffed out his cheeks, blew, blew, blew.

The dragon pulled its head back like a turtle. It jerked its legs, its wings. Magnus Ridolph blew. The dragon gave a great belching roar, in almost comical haste lumbered away. The tremendous leather pinions flapped, it sluggishly took the air, departed across the ocean.

Magnus Ridolph sat down on the sand. For a long moment he sat limply. Then

he looked down at his tunic, once crisp and white, now befouled with a black viscosity. As the wind changed, Joe and Lucky felt the odor. Joe coughed, and Magnus Ridolph slowly looked in their direction.

And slowly Magnus Ridolph got to his feet, threw aside his tunic, and slowly marched back to the hotel.

MAGNUS RIDOLPH appeared at dinnertime scrubbed, polished, in clean clothes. His white beard was brushed till it shone like angelical floss, and his manner was unusually affable.

Lucky and Joe were relieved to find him in such good humor. They had expected angry accusations, threats and demands. Magnus Ridolph's genial attitude came as a glad surprise, and they vied with each other in cordiality. Mayla, in bed with a headache, was not present.

Blaine explained the circumstances which had led to the experiment, and Magnus Ridolph seemed genuinely interested.

Lucky went so far as to be jocular. "—and Lord, Magnus, when you looked up at that dragon, I swear your beard stuck out from your face like it was electrified!"

"Of course we had you covered all the time," said Joe. "We had a bead on that dragon every instant. One false move and he'd been a goner."

"Just what was that tube, Magnus?" asked Lucky. "It sure did the trick. Marvelous." He nudged Blaine. "I told you he had brains."

Magnus Ridolph held up a deprecatory hand. "Simple application of what I learned from the movies you showed me."

"How's that?" asked Joe, lighting a cigar.

"Have you noticed the voice-box on the Mollies? It's a paraboloid surface, and the vibrator is at the focus. It gives them exquisite control over sound. By moving the vibrator they can concentrate a node at any given point; I wouldn't doubt but what they see the pressure patterns in some peculiar manner. In other words, they can use their

voices as men use an air-hammer, especially in the supersonic ranges. I suspected as much when I saw them excavating those foundations. They were not blowing the sand out with air, they were blasting it out with appropriately applied pressure waves."

"Why, of course!" said Joe, disgustedly spitting a bit of tobacco to the side. "That's how they mixed up the mess in that terrible wallow. Just dumped it in, looked at it, and it all seemed to melt and stir in by itself."

Lucky reproached Joe with a look; best to keep Magnus Ridolph's mind away from wallows and vile black ooze.

Magnus Ridolph lit a cigarette and puffed a thoughtful gust into the air.

"Now when one of the native beasts attacked them, they projected a supersonic beam in a frequency to which the creatures were most sensitive. Probably aimed for a tender spot—the eye, for instance. A study of the sound track proved my theory. I found a clear record of strong inaudible sound. I calculated the rate of what seemed the most effective frequency, and this morning built a suitable projector."

Joe and Lucky shook their heads in admiration. "Don't see how he does it." "Beats everything I've ever heard of."

Magnus Ridolph smiled. "Now for the hotel, I recommend several large oscillators, mounted permanently, and arranged to project a curtain of the most effective frequency around the property. Any competent sonic engineer can set up such a dome for you."

"Good, good," said Lucky.

"I'll get a man out here right away," said Blaine. "Sure lucky we got you."

Magnus Ridolph made a courteous acknowledgment. "Thank you; perhaps the association will prove of equal value for me."

Blaine stared curiously into Magnus Ridolph's calm countenance.

Lucky said hurriedly, "Now Joe, as to Magnus' fee, I originally mentioned the figure of five thousand munits—"

"Make it ten," said Joe heartily, reaching for his pen. "I think we owe Mr. Ridolph a bonus."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," murmured Magnus Ridolph. "You make me uncomfortable with your generosity. I'm well content with my stipulated fee."

"Well, now, look here—" stammered Joe, making feeble gestures with his pen.

"Surely you can't believe that I'd accept five thousand munits for the—hm, inconsequential events of this afternoon?"

"Well," said Joe, "you never know how a person takes things. Sometimes they'll sue you, ha, ha, for a hair in the soup. Of course in your case—well," he finished lamely, "we hadn't really thought about it."

RIDOLPH frowned thoughtfully. "Ah, if I had an exaggerated sense of dignity, a sop of five thousand munits might only further offend me. But since I am what I am, I'm sure we can let events adjust themselves naturally."

"Sure," said Lucky enthusiastically. "Gentlemen to gentlemen."

Joe Blaine twirled the cigar in his mouth, looked into space trying to trace the implications of the words.

"Well, suits me," he said reluctantly. He wrote. "Here's your fee, then."

"Thank you." Magnus Ridolph pocketed the check. He looked out the window. "I believe your franchise ends about a half-mile up the beach?"

Blaine nodded. "Just about where I came out of the jungle this morning. Maybe a little this way."

Magnus Ridolph said abstractedly, "The closer to the Mollie village, the better."

"Eh? How's that?"

Magnus Ridolph looked up in surprise. "Haven't I described my plans for the bottling and processing plant? No? Today I applied via space-wave for a use permit of the beach."

Joe and Lucky had turned their heads simultaneously, staring. Their faces wore the expressions seen on small animals who, tripping a baited trigger, snap their own flash-light photographs.

"Processing plant?"

"For what?"

Magnus Ridolph said in a pedantic

tone, "I've tentatively decided on the name Mephitoline—which to some extent describes the product."

"But—"

"But—"

"It has been my experience," continued Magnus Ridolph, "that the more noxious a salve, an unguent, or a beauty aid, the more eagerly it is purchased, and the greater its therapeutic or psychological value. In this respect, that unspeakably vile liquid which you used this afternoon in your experiment, can hardly be improved upon. Mephitoline, suitably bottled and attractively packaged, will be a valuable specific against psycho-somatic disorders."

"But—"

"Possibly Mephitoline may be used as a fixative in the perfume industry, as being more positive than either ambergris, musk, or any of the synthetics. I also anticipate a large and steady sale to college fraternities, lodges, and secret organizations, where it might become an important adjunct to their rituals."

Magnus Ridolph turned a grave glance upon Joe and Lucky.

"I have you two to thank for putting this opportunity in my way. But then, the Spa of the Stars will doubtless share in any prosperity which might come to the Mephitoline Bottling Works. Plant workers will no doubt spend part of their pay at your bars, only three minutes walk away. . ."

"Look here," said Blaine, in a voice like an old-fashioned wagon crossing a gravelled road, "you know darn well that a plant bottling that black stuff a few hundred yards upwind from the hotel would chase every guest back on the same packet that brought him!"

"Not at all," argued Magnus Ridolph. "The Mephitoline plant would add a great deal of color and atmosphere. I believe that the plant and the Spa would complement each other very well. I'm sure you must have thought of it yourself: 'Spa of the Stars, Health Center of the Cluster. If You've Got It, Mephitoline Will Cure It'—something of the sort. But, as you see," and Magnus Ridolph smiled apologetically, "I'm a

dreamer. I have no head for business. You two are really better suited to managing a modern medical laboratory. I suppose it would be better for us all if I sold out to you for—say, twenty-five thousand munits. Cheap at the price."

Joe Blaine spat in a wordless futility of anger and disgust.

"Pah!" snorted Lucky. "You're selling us a gold brick. You haven't got a plant, you don't even know whether the stuff is any good."

MAGNUS RIDOLPH seemed impressed with Lucky's reasoning. He rubbed his beard thoughtfully.

"That's a very good point, Mr. Woolrich. A very strong point. After all, how can we be sure of Mephitoline's efficacy? The sensible solution is to test it. Hm—I see that you have a rather severe case of acne. And—yes—Mr. Blaine appears to be suffering from—is it heat-rash? or some sort of itch?"

"Heat-rash!" snapped Joe.

"We'll put Mephitoline to a test. Each of you can rub Mephitoline over your lesions—or better yet, submerge yourselves in a Mephitoline bath. Give it a fair chance. Then if your conditions are not alleviated, we'll know that Mephitoline is useful only in a psychological sense, and my price will drop to fifteen thousand munits. If your ailments are cured, and Mephitoline has a specific value, the price remains at twenty-five thousand munits. Of course, if you and Mr. Woolrich do not avail yourselves of this opportunity, I personally can't afford to give it up."

There was a short silence.

"Well, Joe," said Lucky wearily, "he's got us over a barrel."

"Not at all," protested Magnus Ridolph. "By no means! I am offering you a valuable property at a ridiculously—"

Blaine interrupted him. "Ten thousand munits is our top price. Take it or leave it."

"Very well," said Magnus Ridolph readily. "Ten thousand—if the Mephitoline does not cure your itch. But unless the test is made, I'll have to hold out for twenty-five thousand."

In a tight-lipped atmosphere the Mephitoline was gingerly swabbed over the afflicted parts. Magnus Ridolph, however, insisted on a liberal application.

"If the job is scamped, we will never be sure in our own minds."

But when the Mephitoline was finally scraped off with sticks, the itch and the acne were found still to be in evidence.

"Now, are you satisfied?" asked Joe, glaring from behind the application like a tiger made-up with grease-paint. "It don't work. I itch like fury. It's even worse than before."

"The substance is evidently no cure-all," said Magnus Ridolph regretfully.

Lucky had been scrubbing himself with alcohol. "How do you get this stuff off? Soap and water, I guess would be better. . ."

But thorough scouring still did not entirely erase the Mephitoline; a strong odor still clung to the persons of Joe Blaine and Lucky Woolrich.

"Cripes," muttered Joe, "how long does this stuff last?" He looked suspiciously at Magnus Ridolph. "How did you get it off you?"

Magnus Ridolph, standing carefully aloof, said, "That's a rather valuable bit

of information, I'm sorry to say. I arrived at the formula after considerable—"

"All right," said Joe brutally. "How much?"

Magnus Ridolph drew his fine white eyebrows up into an injured line. "Oh, negligible. I'll make only a token charge of a thousand munits. If you perform—ah, further experiments with Mephitoline, you'll need the solution time and time again."

There were several bitter statements, but finally Joe wrote Magnus Ridolph a check, eleven thousand munits in all.

"Now, how do we get rid of this horrible stench?"

"Apply a ten percent solution of hydrogen peroxide," said Magnus Ridolph.

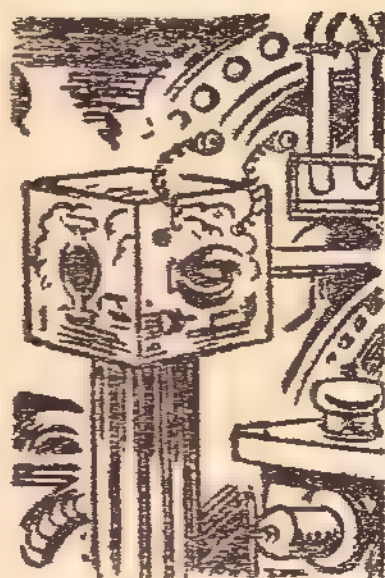
Joe started to bellow; Lucky stifled him, and went off to the hotel dispensary. He returned with an empty gallon jug.

"I can't find any!" he said querulously. "The bottle's empty!"

"There is no more," said Magnus Ridolph frankly. "I used it all myself. Of course, if you wish to retain me as a consultant, I can outline a simple chemical process. . . ."

A CAPTAIN FUTURE NOVELET

The Futuremen Battle Against a Menace to the
Solar System That Only Simon Wright,
"the Brain," Can Cope With in—



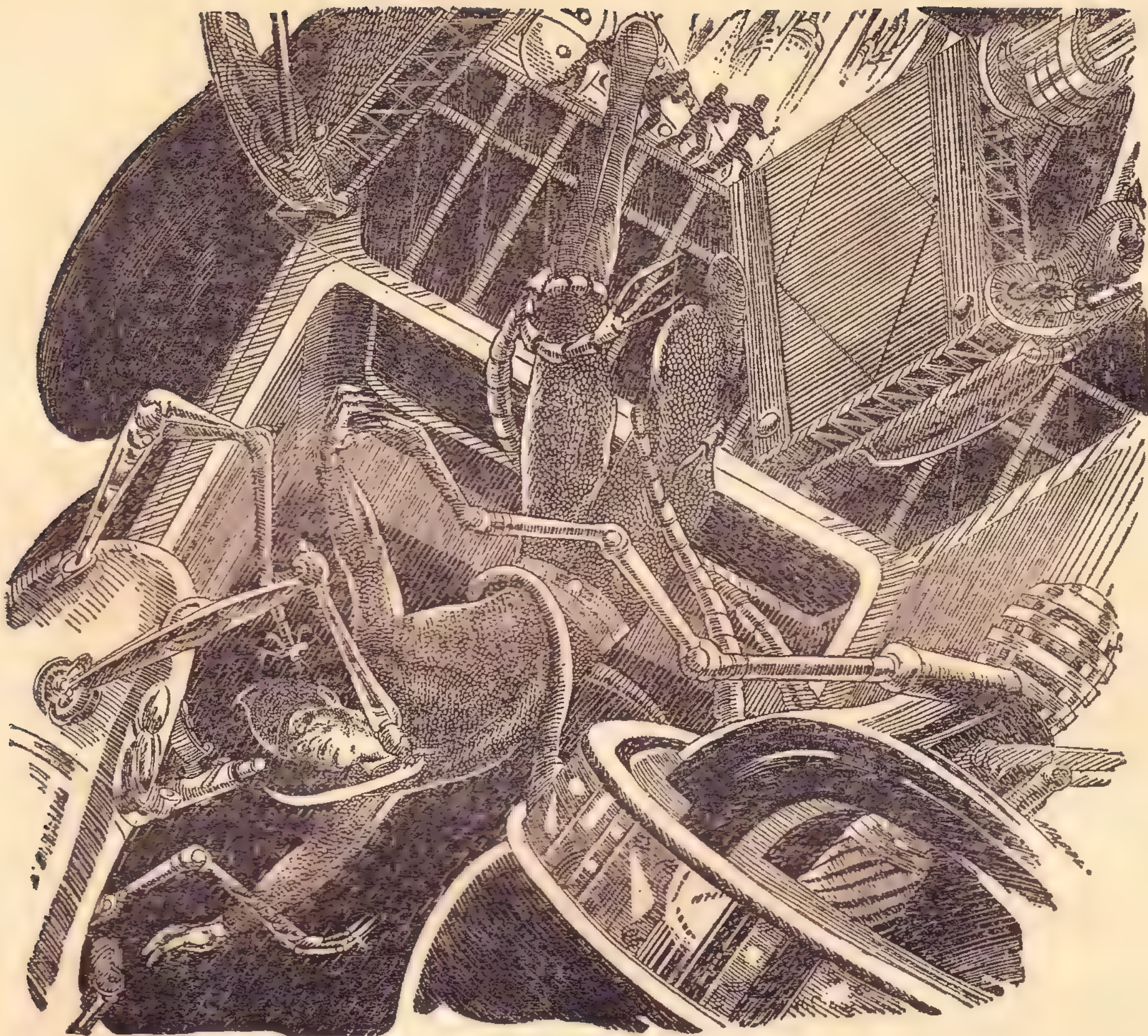
THE HARPERS OF TITAN

by

EDMOND HAMILTON

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE!





The captain vanished down a wide trap in the street

PURPOSE

By RAY BRADBURY

"A ship has come from another world—with nine men . . ."

THE city waited twenty thousand years.

The planet moved through space and the flowers of the fields grew up and fell away and still the city waited, and the rivers of the planet rose and waned and turned to dust. Yet still the city waited. The winds that had been young

and wild grew old and serene and the clouds of the sky that had been ripped and torn were left alone to drift in idle whitenesses. Still the city waited.

The city waited with its windows and its black obsidian walls and its sky towers and its unpennanted turrets, with its untrod streets and its untouched

doorknobs, with not a scrap of paper or a fingerprint upon it. The city waited while the planet arched in space, following its orbit about a blue-white sun, and the seasons passed from ice to fire and back to ice and then to green fields and yellow summer meadows.

It was on a summer afternoon in the middle of the twenty-thousandth year that the city ceased waiting.

In the sky, a rocket appeared.

The rocket soared over, turned, came back, and landed in the shale meadow fifty yards from the obsidian wall.

There were booted footsteps in the thin grass and calling voices from men within the rocket to men without.

"Ready?"

"All right, men, careful! Into the city. Jensen, you and Hutchinson patrol ahead. Keep a sharp eye."

The city opened secret nostrils in its black walls and a steady suction vent deep in the body of the city drew storms of air back through channels, through thistle-filters and dust-collectors, to a fine and tremblingly delicate series of coils and webs which glowed with silver light. Again and again the immense suction occurred, again and again the odors from the meadow were borne upon warm winds into the city.

"Fire odor, the scent of a fallen meteor, hot metal. A ship has come from another world. The brass smell, the dusty fire smell of burnt powder, sulphur and rocket brimstone."

This information, stamped on tapes which sprocketed into slots, slid down through yellow cogs into further machines.

Click-chakk-chakk-chakk.

A CALCULATOR made the sound of a metronome. Five, six, seven, eight, nine. Nine men! An instantaneous typewriter inked this message on tape which slithered and vanished.

Clickety-click-chakk-chakk.

The city awaited the soft tread of their rubberoid boots.

The great city nostrils dilated again.

The smell of butter. In the city air, from the stalking men, faintly, the aura

which, wafted to the great Nose broke down into memories of milk, cheese, ice cream, butter, the effluvium of a dairy economy.

Click-click.

"Careful, men!"

"Jones, get your gun out. Don't be a fool!"

"The city's dead; why worry?"

"You can't tell."

Now, at the barking talk, the Ears awoke. After centuries of listening to winds that blew small and faint, of hearing leaves strip from trees and grass grow softly in the time of melting snows, now the Ears oiled themselves in a self-lubrication, drew taut, great drums upon which the heartbeat of the invaders might pummel and thud delicately as the tremor of a gnat's wing. The Ears listened and the Nose siphoned up great chambers of odor.

The perspiration of frightened men arose. There were islands of sweat under their arms, and sweat in their hands as they held their guns.

The Nose sifted and worried this air, like a connoisseur busy with an ancient vintage.

Chikk-chikk-chakk, click. Information rotated down on parallel check-tapes. Perspiration; chlorides such and such per cent; sulfates so-and-so; urea nitrogen, ammonia nitrogen, *thus*: creatinine, sugar, lactic acid, *there!*

Bells rang. Small totals jumped up.

The Nose whispered, expelling the tested air. The Great Ears listened:

"I think we should go back to the rocket, captain."

"I give the orders, Mr. Smith!"

"Yes, sir."

"You up there, patrol! See anything?"

"Nothing, sir. Looks like it's been dead a long time!"

"You see, Smith? Nothing to fear."

"I don't like it. I don't know why. You ever feel you've seen a place before? Well, this city's too familiar."

"Nonsense. This planetary system's billions of miles from Earth; we couldn't possibly've been here ever before. Ours is the only light-year rocket in existence."

"That's how I feel, anyway, sir. I think we should get out."

The footsteps faltered. There was only the sound of the intruder's breath on the still air.

The Ear heard and quickened. Rotors glided, liquids glittered in small creeks through valves and blowers. A formula and a concoction, one followed another. Moments later, responding to the summons of the Ear and Nose, through giant holes in the city walls a fresh vapor blew out over the invaders.

"Smell *that*, Smith? Ahh. Green grass. Ever smell anything better? By golly, I just like to stand here and smell it."

Invisible chlorophyll blew among the standing men.

"Ahhh!"

The footsteps continued.

"Nothing wrong with *that*, eh, Smith? Come on!"

The Ear and Nose relaxed a billionth of a fraction. The countermove had succeeded. The pawns were proceeding forward.

NOW the cloudy Eyes of the city moved out of fog and mist.

"Captain, the windows!"

"What?"

"Those house windows, there! I saw them move!"

"I didn't see it."

"They shifted. They changed color. From dark to light."

"Look like ordinary square windows to me."

Blurred objects focussed. In the mechanical ravines of the city oiled shafts plunged, balance wheels dipped over into green oil pools. The window frames flexed. The windows gleamed.

Below, in the street, walked two men, a patrol, followed at a safe interval, by seven more. Their uniforms were white, their faces as pink as if they had been slapped, their eyes were blue. They walked upright, upon hind legs, carrying metal weapons. Their feet were booted. They were males, with eyes, ears, mouths, noses.

The windows trembled. The windows

thinned. They dilated imperceptibly, like the irises of numberless eyes.

"I tell you, captain, it's the windows!"

"Get along."

"I'm going back, sir."

"What?"

"I'm going back to the rocket."

"Mr. Smith!"

"I'm not falling into any trap!"

"Afraid of an empty city?"

The others laughed, uneasily.

"Go on, laugh!"

The street was stone-cobbled, each stone three inches wide, six inches long. With a move unrecognizable as such, the street settled. It weighed the invaders.

In a machine cellar, a red wand touched a numeral. 178 pounds. 210, 154, 201, 198 each man weighed, registered and the record spooled down into a correlative darkness.

Now the city was fully awake!

Now the vents sucked and blew air, the tobacco odor from the invaders' mouths, the green soap scent from their hands. Delicately, even their eyeballs had an odor, the city detected it, and this information formed totals which scurried down to total other totals. The crystal windows glittered, the Ear tautened and skinned the drum of its hearing tight, tighter, all of the senses of the city swarming like a fall of unseen snow, counting the respiration and the dim hidden heartbeats of the men, listening, watching, tasting.

FOR the streets were like tongues, and where the men passed the taste of their heels ebbed down through stone pores to be calculated on litmus. This chemical totality, so subtly collected, was appended to the now increasing sums waiting the final calculation among the whirling wheels and whispering spokes.

Footsteps. Running.

"Come back! Smith!"

"No, blast you!"

"Get him, men!"

Footsteps rushing.

A final test. The city, having listened, watched, tasted, felt, weighed, and bal-

anced, must perform a final task.

A trap flung wide in the street. The captain, unseen to the others, running, vanished.

Hung by his feet, a razor drawn across his throat, another down his chest, his carcass instantly emptied of its entrails, exposed upon a table under the street, in a hidden cell, the captain died. Great crystal microscopes stared at the red twines of muscle, bodiless fingers probed the still pulsing heart. The flaps of his sliced skin were pinned to the table while hands shifted parts of his body like a quick and curious player of chess, using the red pawns and the red pieces.

Above on the street the men ran. Smith ran, men shouted. Smith shouted, and below in this curious room blood flowed into capsules, was shaken, spun, shoved on smear slides under further microscopes, counts made, temperatures taken, heart cut in seventeen sections, liver and kidneys expertly halved. Brain was drilled and scooped from bone socket, nerves pulled forth like the dead wires of a switchboard, muscles plucked for elasticity, while in the electric subterranean of the city the Mind at last totalled out its grandest total and all of the machinery ground to a monstrous and momentary halt!

The total.

These *are* men. These *are* men from a far world, a *certain* planet, and they have certain eyes, certain ears, and they walk upon legs in a specified way and carry weapons and think and fight and they have particular hearts and all such organs as are recorded from long ago.

Above, men ran down the street toward the rocket.

Smith ran.

The total.

These are our enemies. These are the ones we have waited for twenty thousand years to see again. These are the men upon whom we waited to visit revenge. Everything totals. These are the men of a planet called Earth who declared war upon Taollan twenty thousand years ago, who kept us in slavery,

and ruined us and destroyed us with a great disease. Then they went off to live in another galaxy to escape that disease which they visited upon us after ransacking our world. They have forgotten that war and that time, and they have forgotten us. But we have not forgotten them. These are our enemies. This is certain. Our waiting is done.

"Smith, come back!"

Quickly. Upon the red table, with the spread-eagled captain's body empty, new hands began a fight of motion. Into the wet interior were placed organs of copper, brass, silver, aluminum, rubber and silk, spiders spun gold web which was stung into the skin, a heart was attached, and into the skull-case was fitted a platinum brain which hummed and fluttered small sparkles of blue fire, and the wires led down through the body to the arms and legs. In a moment the body was sewn tight, the incisions waxed, healed at neck and throat and about the skull, perfect, fresh, new.

The captain sat up and flexed his arms.

"Stop!"

On the street, the captain, reappeared, raised his gun and fired.

Smith fell, a bullet in his heart.

The other men turned.

The captain ran to them.

"That fool! Afraid of a city!"

THEY looked at the body of Smith at their feet.

They looked: their captain and their eyes widened and narrowed.

"Listen to me," said the captain. "I have something important to tell you."

Now the city, which had weighed and tasted and smelled them, which had used all its powers save one, prepared to use its final ability, the power of speech. It did not speak with the rage and hostility of its massed walls or towers, nor with the bulk of its cobbled avenues and fortresses of machinery. It spoke with the quiet voice of one man.

"I am no longer your captain," he said. "Nor am I a man."

The men moved back.

"I am the city," he said, and smiled.

"I've waited two hundred centuries," he said. "I've waited for the sons of the sons of the sons to return."

"Captain, sir!"

"Let me continue. Who built me, the city? The men who died built me. The old race who once lived here. The people whom the Earthmen left to die of a terrible disease, a form of leprosy with no cure. And the men of that old race, dreaming of the day when Earthmen might return, built this city, and the name of this city was and is *Revenge*, upon the planet of Darkness, near the shore of the sea of Centuries, by the Mountains of the Dead; all very poetic. This city was to be a balancing machine, a litmus, an antenna to test all future space travellers. In twenty thousand years only two other rockets landed here. One from a distant galaxy called Ennt, and the inhabitants of that craft were tested, weighed, found wanting, and let free, unscathed, from the city. As were the visitors in the second ship. But, today! At long last! You've come. The revenge will be carried out to the last detail. Those men have been dead two hundred centuries, but they left a city here to welcome you."

"Captain, sir, you're not feeling well, perhaps you'd better come back to the ship, sir."

The city trembled.

The pavements opened and the men fell, screaming. Falling, they saw bright razors flash to meet them!

Time passed. Soon came the call:

"Smith?"

"Here!"

"Jensen?"

"Here!"

"Jones, Hutchinson, Springer?"

"Here, here, here!"

They stood by the door of the rocket.

"We return to Earth immediately."

"Yes, sir!"

The incisions on their necks were invisible, as were their hidden brass hearts and silver organs and the fine golden wire of their nerves. There was a faint electric hum from their heads.

"On the double!"

Nine men hurried the golden bombs of disease-culture into the rocket.

"These are to be dropped on Earth."

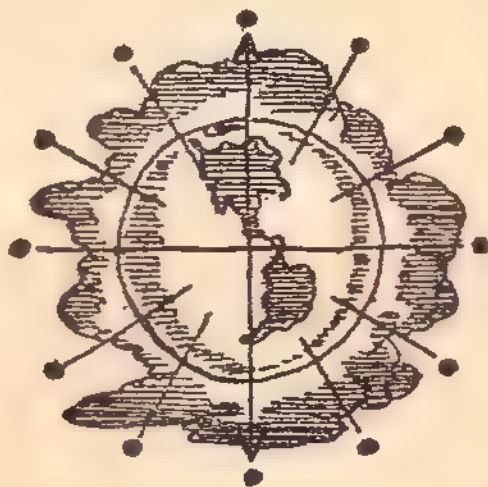
"Right, sir!"

The rocket valve slammed. The rocket jumped into the sky.

As the thunder faded, the city lay upon the summer meadow. Its glass eyes dulled over, the Ear relaxed, the great nostril vents stopped, the streets no longer weighed or balanced, and the hidden machinery paused in its bath of oil.

In the sky, the rocket dwindled.

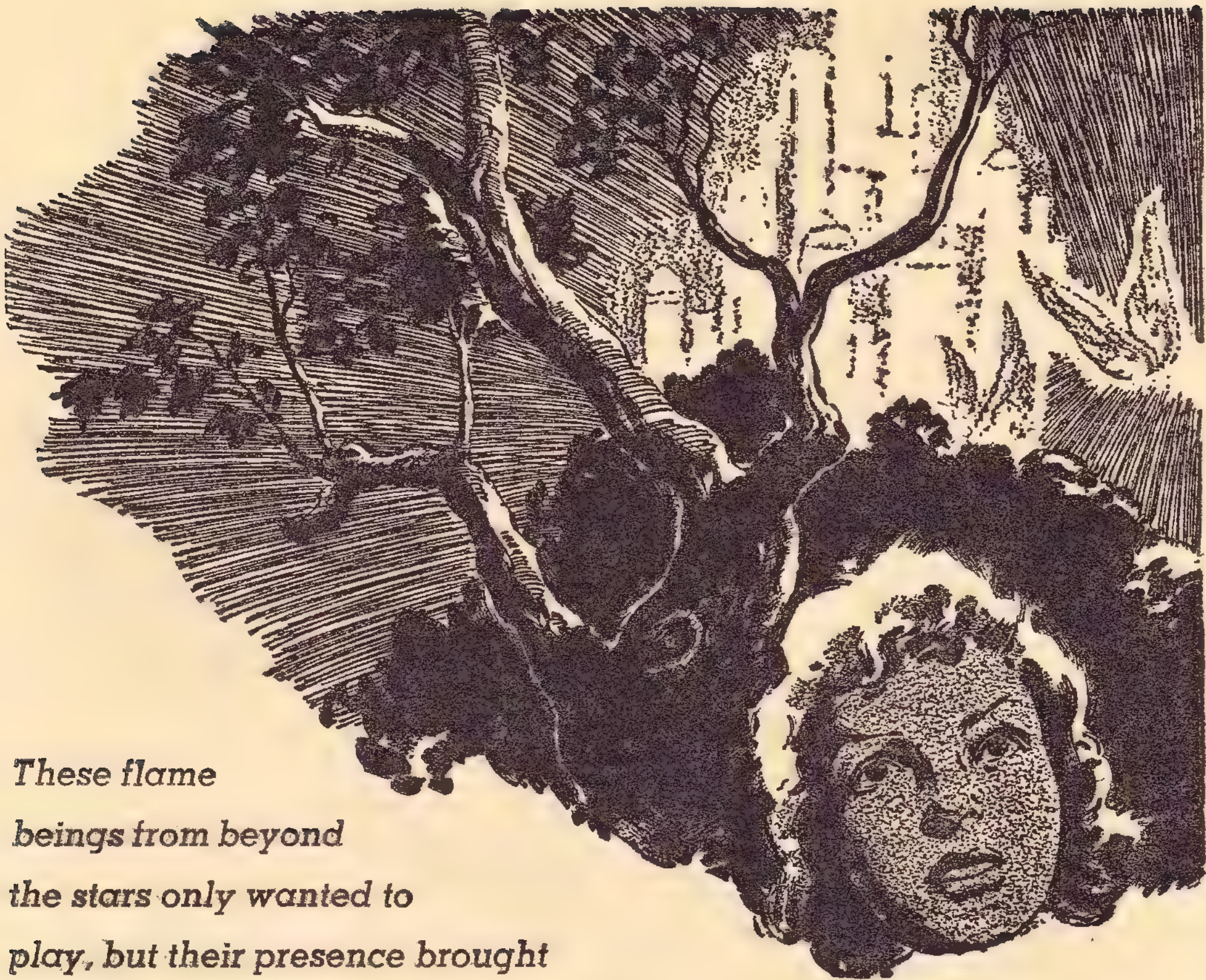
Slowly, pleasurably, the city enjoyed the luxury of dying.



The pen that wrote by itself was more than a gadget, for with its help Rena Corsen and George Brooks bridged eternity's chasm in *SUNDAY IS THREE THOUSAND MILES AWAY*, a novelet by Raymond F. Jones featured in the June—

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*These flame
beings from beyond
the stars only wanted to
play, but their presence brought
fear and panic to a peaceful community!*

THE TRUANTS

CHAPTER I

Prelude to Nightmare

The farmhouse was tall and white. For eighty-three years it had stood in the green countryside where the shaggy Pennsylvania hills slope down to the meadows of Ohio. It was a wise house and a kindly one. It knew all there was to know of the wheeling seasons, birth and death, human passion, human sorrow.

But now something had come into the night that it did not know. From the starry sky it came, a sound and presence not of the Earth. The house listened and was afraid . . .

PRELUDE to nightmare. Hugh second of those last calm precious minutes before his familiar world began clearly, in the days that followed every to fall about him.



There was a swoop, a flash of light, and an ominous cracking sound

a novelet by LEIGH BRACKETT

He sat in the old farmhouse living room, smoking and drowsily considering the pages of a dairy equipment catalogue. From outside in the warm May night came a chorus of squeals, yelps and amiable growlings where Janie played some complicated game with the dogs.

He remembered that the air was soft, sweet with the smell of the rain that had fallen that afternoon. He remembered the chirping of the crickets. He remembered thinking that summer was on its way at last.

Lucy Sherwin looked up from her sewing. "I swear," she said, "that child grows an inch every day. I can't keep her dresses down to save me."

Sherwin grinned. "Wait another five years. Then you can really start worrying about her clothes."

His pipe had gone out. He lit it again. Janie whooped with laughter out on the lawn. The dogs barked. Lucy went on with her sewing.

Sherwin turned the pages of the catalogue. After a time he realized, without

really thinking of it, that the sounds from outside had stopped.

The child, the dogs, the shrilling crickets, all were silent. And it seemed to Sherwin, in the stillness, that he heard a vast strange whisper hissing down the sky.

A gust of wind blew sharp and sudden, tearing at the trees. The frame of the old house quivered. Then it was gone and Lucy said, "It must be going to storm."

Janie's voice lifted up in a sudden cry. "Daddy! *Daddy!* Come quick!"

Sherwin groaned. "Oh, Lord," he said. "What now?" He leaned over and called through the open window. "What do you want?"

"Come here, Daddy!"

Lucy smiled. "Better go, dear. Maybe she's found a snake."

"Well, if she has she can let it go again." But he rose, grumbling, and went out the door, snapping on the yard light.

"Where are you, Janie? What is it?"

He heard her voice from the far side of the yard, where the light did not reach. He started toward her. The dogs came running to him, a brace of lolling spaniels and a big golden retriever. They panted happily. Sherwin called again.

"Jane!"

She did not answer. He had passed out of the light now but there was part of a moon and presently he saw her, a thin intense child with dark hair and very blue eyes, standing perfectly still and staring toward the west.

She said breathlessly, "It's gone now, down in the woods."

Sherwin followed her intent gaze, across the little creek that ran behind the house and the great white dairy barn, across the wide meadow beyond it, and farther still to the woods.

The thick stand of oak and maple and sycamore covered acres of marshy bottomland too low for pasture. Sherwin had never cleared it. The massed darkness of the trees lay silent and untroubled in the dim moonlight. The crickets had begun to sing again.

"What's gone?" demanded Sherwin. "I don't see anything."

"It came down out of the sky," Janie said. "A big dark thing, like an airplane without any wings. It went down into the woods."

"Nonsense. There haven't been any planes around and if one had crashed in the woods we'd all know it."

"It didn't crash. It just came down. It made a whistling noise." She all but shook him in her excitement. "Come on! Let's go see what it is!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Jane! That's ridiculous. You saw a cloud or a big bird. Now forget it."

HE started back to the house. Janie danced in the long grass, almost weeping.

"But I saw it! I saw it!"

Sherwin said carelessly, "Well, it'll keep till tomorrow. Go down and make sure the gate's locked where the new calf is. The cow has been thinking about getting back to the pasture."

He had locked the gate himself but he wanted to get Janie's mind off her vision. She could be very insistent at times.

"All right," she answered sulkily. "But you wait. You'll see!"

She went off toward the pen. Sherwin returned to his catalogue and his comfortable chair.

An hour later he called her to go to bed and she was gone.

He hunted her around the barn and outbuildings, thinking she might have fallen and been hurt, but she was not there. The dogs too were missing.

He stood irresolute and then a thought occurred to him and he looked toward the woods. He saw a tiny gleam of light—a flashlight beam shining through the black fringes of the trees.

Sherwin went down across the creek into the meadow. The dogs met him. They were subdued and restless and when he spoke to them they whined and rubbed against him.

Janie came out from the pitch darkness under the trees. She was walking slowly and by the torchbeam Sher-

win saw that her face was rapt and her eyes wide and full of wonder. There was such a queer breathless hush about her, somehow, that he checked his first angry words.

She whispered, "They came out of the ship, all misty and bright. I couldn't see them very well but they had wings, beautiful fiery wings. They looked like angels."

Her gaze turned upon him, not really seeing him. She asked, "Do you think they could be angels truly?"

"I think," said Sherwin, "that you're going to get a thrashing, young lady." He caught her arm and began to march her back across the meadow. "You know perfectly well that you're forbidden to go into the woods after dark!"

She wasn't listening to him. She said, in the same odd distant voice, "Do you think they could be, Daddy?"

"What are you talking about?"

"*Them*. Could they be angels?"

"*Angels!*" Sherwin snorted. "I don't know why angels should turn up in our woods and if they did they wouldn't need a ship to fly around in."

"No," said Janie. "No, I guess they wouldn't."

"Angels! If you think you can excuse yourself with a story like that you're mistaken." He quickened the pace. "March along there, Miss Jane! My palm is itching."

"Besides," murmured Janie, "I don't think angels laugh—and they were laughing."

Sherwin said no more. There seemed to be nothing more to say.

He was still baffled at the end of a stormy session in the living room. Jane clung stubbornly to her story, so stubbornly that she was on the verge of hysterics, and no amount of coaxing, reasoning or threatened punishment could shake her. Lucy sent her sobbing off to bed.

"I can't understand the child," she said. "I've never seen her like this before."

Sherwin shrugged. "Oh, kids get funny streaks sometimes. She'll forget it."

He had forgotten it himself by morn-

ing. He saw Janie go off to school with Richard Allerton, the boy from the neighboring farm. They always walked together, trudging the half mile into the village. Janie was chattering sixteen to the dozen and now and again she whirled about in a sort of dance, holding out her arms like wings.

Toward noon Lucy called him in from the barn. "Miss Harker just phoned," she told him. "She wanted to know if Janie had come home."

Sherwin frowned. "You mean she isn't in school?"

"No—not after recess. Miss Harker said a number of children were missing. Hugh, I'm worried. You don't suppose—?"

"Nonsense. The little devil's playing hooky, that's all." He said angrily, "What's got into the kid all of a sudden, anyway? All that cutting up last night—*hey!*" He turned and looked at the woods.

After a moment he said, "I'll bet that's it, Lucy. I'll bet she's taken her pals down to look at the 'angels'."

Lucy said anxiously, "I wish you'd go and see."

"That," said Sherwin, "is exactly what I'm going to do—right now!"

THE dogs came with him, chasing each other merrily after imaginary rabbits. But when he reached the edge of the wood they stopped and would come no farther.

He remembered that they had not gone in with Janie the night before and he could not understand what was the matter with them. The woods were full of small game and normally the dogs spent half their time there, hunting by themselves.

He called, whistled and swore but they hung back, whimpering. Finally he gave up and went on alone, shaking his head.

First his child, now his dogs—everything seemed to have gone queer at once.

The day was leaden, heavy with the threat of rain. Under the thick-laced branches of the trees it was almost as

dark as though it were night. The air was moist, dank with the smell of the marshes. Sherwin forced his way through the undergrowth. From time to time he shouted Janie's name.

Once, some distance away, he thought he heard a chorus of voices, the shrill laughter of a number of children. But the trees clashed and rustled in the wind so that he could not be sure—and Janie did not answer his call.

Gradually, creeping in some secret way along the channels of his nerves, the realization came to him that he was not alone.

He began to move more slowly, looking about him. He could see nothing and yet his heart pounded and the sweat turned cold on his body. Presently he stopped. The dark woods seemed to close around him, a smothering weight of foliage. He called again once or twice, quite sharply. And then he caught a flicker of motion among the trees.

He thought at first that it was the child, hiding from him, and that he had glimpsed her dress moving. But as he went toward it there was a subtle stirring in the underbrush that was never made by human feet. And as the green fronds were disturbed he saw a muted flash of fire and *something*, large and misty and glowing bright, darted swiftly through the lower branches. The leaves were shaken and there was a sound as of the beating of wings.

He caught only the briefest glimpse of it. He was not sure of anything about it, its shape, size or substance. He knew only that it was not Earthly.

Sherwin opened his mouth but no cry came. Speechless, breathless, he stood for a moment utterly still. Then he turned and bolted.

meadow and fetched up in the midst of part of his dairy herd. The cows went lumbering away in alarm and Sherwin stopped, beginning to be ashamed of himself.

He turned to look back. Nothing had followed. The dogs sighted him—he had come out of the trees lower down, toward Allerton's land—and ran to greet him. He patted their rough reassuring bodies with a shaking hand and as his brief panic left him he became angry.

"It was only a trick of light among the trees," he told himself. "A wisp of ground fog, with the sun touching it."

But there was no sun, no fog either.

He had seen something.

He would admit that. His pride forced him to admit it. That he should take to his heels in his own woods. . . ! But his mind, which he had found adequate for forty years of successful living, began to function normally, to reject the impossible thing it had thought such a short time before.

The thing had startled him, the stealthy movement, the sudden glowing flash. That was why he had—imagined. Some great tropical bird, strayed far north, hiding frightened in the unfamiliar woods, rocketing away at his approach. That was what he had seen. That had been Janie's 'angel.' A big, strange bird.

His mind was satisfied. And yet his body trembled still and some inner sense told him that he lied. He ignored it. And he started only slightly when a man's voice hailed him loudly from across the meadow.

He turned to see Allerton approaching. The man was like a large edition of his son, stocky, sunburned, with close-cropped head. Sherwin could see on his face all the signs of a storm gathered and ready to break.

"Saw you down here, Hugh," said Allerton. "Is Rich at your place? The teacher says he's cut school."

Sherwin shook his head. "Jane's up to the same tricks. I'm pretty sure they're in the woods, Sam. Jane found something there last night—"

He hesitated. Somehow his tongue

CHAPTER II

Nightmare by Daylight

SHERWIN had not gone very deep into the woods. Within a few minutes he came plunging out into the open

refused to shape any coherent words.

Allerton demanded impatiently, "Just what do you mean, she found something?"

"Oh, you know how kids are. They run a high fever over a new kind of bird. Anyway, I'm sure they're in there. I heard them awhile ago."

"Well," said Allerton, "what are we waiting for? That boy of mine has got some questions to answer!"

He started off immediately. Sherwin fought down a great reluctance to go again into the shadows under the trees and followed.

"Which way?" asked Allerton.

"I don't know," Sherwin said. "I guess we'll just have to call them."

He called. Both men called. There was no answer. There was no sound at all except the wind in the treetops.

Shouting at intervals the names of their children the men went deeper and deeper into the heart of the woods. In spite of himself Sherwin started nervously now and again when the branches were shaken by a sharper gust, letting the gray daylight flicker through. But he saw nothing.

After a long time they splashed through an arm of the swamp and scrambled up onto a ridge covered with a stand of pines. Allerton halted and would go no farther.

"Blast it, Hugh, the kids aren't in here! I'm going back."

But Sherwin was bent forward, listening. "Wait a minute. I thought I heard—"

The tall pines rocked sighing overhead. And then, through the rustle and murmur of the trees there came a burst of laughter and the cries of children busy with some game.

Sherwin nodded. "I know now where they are. Come on."

He scrambled down the far side of the ridge, heading south and west. There was a knoll of higher ground where some ancient trees had fallen in a winter's storm, carrying the lighter growth with them. The children's voices had come from the direction of the clearing.

He went perhaps a hundred yards and then paused, frowning. He began to work back and forth in the undergrowth, growing more and more perplexed and somehow frightened. The heavy gloom melted away oddly between the trees and his vision seemed blurred.

"I can't find the clearing," he said.

"You've missed it. You took the wrong direction."

"Listen, these are my woods. I know them." He pointed. "The clearing should be ahead there but I can't see it. Look at the tree trunks, Sam. Look how they shimmer."

Allerton grunted. "Just a trick of the light."

Sherwin had begun to shiver. He cried out loudly, "Jane! Janie, answer me!"

HE began to thrash about in the underbrush and as he approached the strangely shimmering trees he was overcome by dizziness and threw his arm across his eyes.

He took a step or two forward blindly. Suddenly almost under his feet there was a crackle and a swish of something moving in haste, a sharp, breathless giggle.

"Hey!" said Allerton. "Hey, that's Rich!"

He plunged forward angrily now, yelling, "Richard! Come here, you!" As he came up beside Sherwin he too was stricken with the queer giddiness. The two men clung to each other a moment and there came a squeal of laughter out of nowhere and the voice of a little girl whispering.

"They look so *funny*!"

Sherwin moved back carefully until he and Allerton were out of the space where the light seemed so oddly distorted. The dizziness left him immediately and he could see clearly again. A sort of desperate calm came over him.

"Jane," he called. "Will you answer me? Where are you?"

He heard her voice—the teasing impish voice of a child having a wonderfully good time.

"Come and find me, Daddy!"

"All right," he said. "I will."

There began an eerie game of hide and seek.

The children were close at hand. The men could hear them plainly, the giggling and muffled whispers of a number of boys and girls, but they were not to be seen or found.

"They're hiding behind the trees in the undergrowth," said Allerton. He was angry now, thoroughly angry and baffled. He planted his feet, refusing to hunt any more. He began to roar at Richard.

"You've got to come out sometime," he shouted, "and the sooner you do, the better it'll be for you." He held up his wristwatch. "I'll give you just two minutes to show up!"

He waited. There was a great whispering somewhere. A small boy's voice said scornfully, "All right, scairdy-cat! Go on."

Richard's voice mumbled something in answer and then Richard himself appeared, oddly as though he had materialized out of the empty space between two maples. He shuffled slowly up to his father.

Allerton grabbed him. "Now, then, young man! What are you up to?"

"Nothing, Pa."

"What's going on here? Who's with you?"

"I don't know. I was just—playing."

"I'll teach you to play games with me," said Allerton and laid on. Richard howled.

Without warning, from out of nowhere, terrifyingly bright and beautiful in the shadowy darkness, two misty shapes of flame came rushing.

Sherwin caught a glimpse of Allerton's face, stark white, his mouth fallen open. Then the men were enveloped in a whirling of fiery wings.

This time there was no doubt. The creatures were not birds. They were not anything Sherwin had ever seen or dreamed of before. They were not of this world.

A chill of absolute horror came over him. He flung up his hands to ward the things away and then the buffeting of the flaring pinions drove him to his

knees. The wings were neither flame nor fire but flesh as solid as his own. The brightness was in their substance, a shining of inner light. But even now, close as they were, he could not see the creatures clearly, could not tell exactly the shape of their bodies.

Tiny lightnings stabbed from them at the men. Allerton yelled in mingled pain and panic. He let go of Richard and the boy fled away into the undergrowth. A chorus of frightened cries rose out of the blankness among the trees and Janie's voice screamed, "Don't you hurt my Daddy!"

A last rough thrashing of the wings, a final warning thrust of the queer small lightnings and the things were gone. A great silence descended on the woods, broken only by furtive rustlings where the unseen children crept away. Allerton stared at his hand, which showed a livid burn across the back.

Presently he raised his head. Sherwin had never seen a man so utterly shaken.

"What were they?" he whispered.

SHERWIN drew a deep, unsteady breath. The beating of his heart rocked him where he stood. He tried several times before he could make the words come.

"I don't know. But they want the kids, Sam. Whatever they are they want the kids."

"Richard," said Allerton. "My boy!" He caught Sherwin's arm in a painful grasp. "We've got to stop those things. We've got to get help!"

He went away, crashing like a bull through the underbrush, tearing at the branches that impeded him. Sherwin followed. After what seemed an eternity he saw gray daylight ahead and the open field.

"Sam," he said, "wait a minute. Who are we going to ask for help? Who's going to believe us?"

"I'm going to call the sheriff and he blasted well better believe me!"

"He won't," said Sherwin heavily. "He'll laugh in your face. What are you going to tell him, Sam? Are you going to say you saw angels or devils or things

that came out of the sky in a ship you can't find and can't see?"

Allerton's jaw set hard. "I'm going to try anyway. I'm not going to let *Them* get hold of my kid!"

"All right," Sherwin said. "My place is closer. Use my phone."

He ran beside Allerton across the meadow but he was dreadfully afraid and without hope.

Lucy was waiting in the yard. She gave a little scream when she saw their faces and Sherwin said sharply, "Jane's all right. Go ahead and make your call, Sam. I'll wait here."

He put his arm around Lucy. "The kid's perfectly safe this time. But—"

How to say it, even to your own wife? How to tell her, without sounding insane even to yourself?

"Listen, Lucy, there's some kind of—animal in the woods. I don't know what it is yet. Something mighty-queer. Janie mustn't go in there again, not for one minute. You've got to help me watch her."

He was still evading her questions when Allerton came out again, red-faced and furious.

"He didn't believe a word of it. He told me to get off the bottle." Something desperate came into Allerton's eyes. He sat down on the steps. "We've got to think, Hugh. We've got to think what we're going to do. If it was fall we could burn the woods."

"But it isn't fall," said Sherwin quietly, "it's spring. The kids are coming now. I'm going to talk to them."

A raggle-taggle of small forms had appeared among the fringe of trees. They dispersed in various directions and Richard and Jane came on alone toward the house. They walked very close together, bent over some object that Jane held in her hands.

"Yes," said Sherwin, "they're the only ones that can help us. Let me handle this. I don't want them frightened off."

The children came on, slowly and reluctantly now that they saw their parents waiting. They had straightened up rather guiltily and stepped apart a lit-

tle and Sherwin noticed that Janie now held one hand behind her back.

Her face had a peculiar expression. It was as though she looked with pity upon adults, who had got somehow far beneath her—so far that even their laws and punishments could not affect her much. "What have you got there, Jane?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"May I have it, please?"

He held out his hand. She hesitated, her chin set stubbornly, and then she said, "I can't, Daddy. *They* made it for me, for my very special own. It won't even work unless I want it to."

Sherwin felt a chill contraction of the nerves. He held his voice steady.

"Who are *They*?"

"Why, *Them*," she said, and nodded toward the woods. "I found *Them*, you know. I was first. That's why *They* gave me the present." Suddenly she burst out, "Daddy, *They* didn't mean to frighten you just now. *They're* sorry *They* burned Mr. Allerton's hand. *They* thought he was hurting Richard."

Lucy, whose face had grown quite pale, was on the verge of speaking. Sherwin gave her a stern look and said to the child. "That's all right, Janie. May I see your present?"

Still doubtful, but very proud, she extended her hand. In it was a flat smooth oval of the clearest crystal Sherwin had ever seen.

"Lean over, Daddy. There, like that. Now watch. I'm going to make it work."

She placed her hands in a certain way, holding the crystal between them.

At first he could see nothing but the reflection of the cloudy sky. Then, slowly, the crystal darkened, cleared . . .

CHAPTER III

Terror from Outside

THE Ohio farmland vanished, forgotten. Sherwin bent closed over the uncanny thing held in the hands of his child.

He was looking at another world.

Pictured small and far-away in the tiny oval, he glimpsed a city built all of some glassy substance as pure and bright as diamond, half veiled in a misty glory of light.

The high slim towers swam in a sort of lambent haze, catching soft fire from the clouds that trailed their low-hung edges over them, rose and purple and burning gold. Above in the glowing sky two suns poured out muted, many-colored lights as of an eternal sunset.

And through that shining city that was never built for human kind shackled to the land, flame-winged creatures soared—creatures large and small, coming and going between the diamond spires.

As from a remote distance Sherwin heard Janie's voice, wistful and eager. "It's where They live, Daddy, way off in the sky. Isn't it just like fairyland? And look at this!"

The scene shifted as she spoke. Sherwin looked into a nightmare gulf of black and utter emptiness. He seemed to be racing through it at incredible speed, watching the red and green and yellow stars go plunging and streaming past.

"It's what They saw on Their way! Oh, Daddy, isn't it beautiful?"

It was the tone of the child's voice, far more than the unearthly vision in the crystal, that sent the pang of fear like a knife into Sherwin's heart. He reached out and struck the thing from her hands, and when it fell he kicked it away in the long grass. Before she could cry out her anguish he had caught her fast.

"What do They want with you?" he demanded. "Why do They give you things to tempt you? *What do They want with you?*"

"They only want to be friends!" She pulled free of his grasp, her eyes blazing with tears and anger. "Why do you have to be so mean? Why do you have to spoil everything? They haven't hurt anybody. They haven't done a thing wrong. They gave me a better present than anybody *ever* gave me before and now you've gone and broken it!"

She would have hunted for the crystal but Sherwin stopped her. "Go to your room, Jane. Lucy, go with her. Try to get her calmed down."

Looking at his daughter's white rebellious face, Sherwin felt that he had blundered badly. He had roused her antagonism where he wanted to help. But the unhealthy excitement in her voice had frightened him. He had not realized that Their hold on her was already so strong.

With full force the realization of what he had seen in the evil little toy came over him. He was not an imaginative man. He had never before looked up at the sky and shuddered, thinking what lay beyond it. He felt suddenly naked and defenseless, very small before huge unknown powers. Even the green familiar land did not comfort him. *They* were in the woods. And if They could come, then there were no barriers against anything.

He saw Allerton scuffling about in the grass. Presently he found what he was looking for and stamped it methodically to bits under his heavy boots.

"I saw into it too," he said, "over your shoulder. I don't know what kind of devilment it is but it's no fit thing to have around."

Thud, thud, went the great earth-caked boots. Richard was crying.

"They thought pictures into it," he said. "They were going to make me one too." He glared at his father, and at Sherwin. "Janie's right. You just want to be mean."

Allerton finished his task and went to Richard. There was something almost pathetic in his expression.

"Rich," he said, "did They promise you anything else? Did They ask you to do anything?"

Richard shook his head, looking sulky and mulish, and Sherwin could not tell whether or not the boy was holding back.

"Can They talk to you, Rich?" he asked.

"Uh-huh."

"How?"

"I don't know. You can hear Them,

sort of, inside your head. They can make you see pictures too, anything They want you to see. Stars and comets and all kinds of funny places with funny-looking people and animals and sometimes no people at all."

His round tear-streaked face was taking on that same remote, rapt look that had upset Sherwin so in Janie. He whispered, "I'd sure like to ride in that ship, right across the sky. I'll bet it goes faster than a jet plane. I'd go to all those places and get a lot of things nobody ever saw before and then I'd—"

He broke off in the middle of a dream. Allerton had caught him by the arm.

"You're not going anywhere but home," he said. "And I'll lock you in, if I have to, to keep you there." His eyes met Sherwin's. "See you later, Hugh."

He took the boy away down the road. Sherwin went into the house. He locked the door behind him and loaded his shotgun and set it by. Then he sat down and put his head in his hands and listened dully to the beating of his own heart and wondered.

LUCY came downstairs. "I gave her some aspirin," she said. "She's sleepy now." She sat on the floor at Sherwin's feet and put her arms around his waist. "Hugh, you've got to tell me what's going on!"

He told her slowly, past caring whether she believed him or not.

"Sam and I both saw Them. I thought They were going to kill us, but They only burned Sam's hand. That's why the kids played truant today, to go to Them. There was a whole bunch there, laughing—"

He did not tell Lucy that somehow They had made the children, Themselves and the clearing invisible. Her face was white enough already.

She did not say much. She rose and stood for a moment with her hands clasped hard together. Then she ran back up the stairs and Sherwin heard the door of Janie's room open and then shut tight.

Toward evening he called Allerton.

"I gave Rich a good thrashing," Allerton said. "He's shut in his room and his mother's with him. They'll be all right, Hugh. As long as we watch them the kids will be all right."

His voice did not carry much conviction. Sherwin hung up. He sat in the big chair in the bay window overlooking the woods. He did not turn on the lights. The clouds had broken under the rising wind and the moon threw a pale beam into the high-ceilinged room, touching the ivy wallpaper and the tall white doors. Sherwin waited, as a man waits in dubious refuge, crouched in the chair, trembling from time to time. The silence of the old house was painful in his ears.

He must have dozed, for when suddenly he started up in alarm the moon was gone. And *They* had come out of the woods.

Even through his hatred and his fear Sherwin sensed that *They* were glad to be free of the confinement of the trees. The wind swept strong across the open meadow and *They* rose and swooped upon it, a number of *Them*, their cloudy wings streaking across the rifted stars in wheeling arcs of fire.

He took the shotgun across his knees. His hands were quite steady, but very cold. He watched *Them* and he could not help thinking, *How beautiful They are!*—and he loathed *Them* for their beauty because it was luring his child away from him.

His child, Allerton's child—the children of the farms, the village, the other ones who had gone secretly into the woods. What could *They* want with the human children, these creatures from outside? What dreadful game were *They* playing, the bright-winged demons with *Their* hellish toys?

You can hear them talking inside your head. They can make you see pictures too—anything They want you to see.

Suppose *They* could control the minds of the children? What would you do then? How would you fight it?

Tears came into Sherwin's eyes. He sat with the shotgun in his lap and watched *Them* frolic with the dark sky

and the wind and he waited. But They did not come near the house. Suddenly they darted away, high up, and were gone. He did not see Them again that night.

He debated in the morning whether to send Jane to school at all. Then he thought that she would be better there than cooped up brooding in the house, within sight of the woods. He drove her in himself—a silent, resentful little girl with whom he found it difficult to speak—and passed Allerton's car on the road. Both men were taking the same precautions.

They took the children into the small white schoolhouse and spoke to Miss Harker about keeping a careful eye on them. Then the men went home to their work. The day was oppressive and still with great clouds breeding ominously in the sultry air. Sherwin's uneasiness increased as the hours went by. He called the school twice to make sure Jane was there and he was back again a full hour before the last bell, waiting to take her home.

He sat for a time in the car, growing more and more nervous. The leaves of the trees hung utterly motionless. He was drenched with sweat and the heavy humid air was stifling.

A thunderhead gathered in the west, pushing its boiling crest with terrible swiftness across the sky. He watched it spread and darken to the color of purple ink and then the little ragged wisps of dirty white began to blow underneath its belly and the wind came with sudden violence across the land.

He knew it was going to be a bad one. He left the car and went into the schoolhouse. It was already too dark to see inside the building and the lights came on as he pushed open the door to Janie's classroom. Miss Harker glanced up and then smiled.

"It's going to storm," he said rather inanely. "I thought I'd wait inside."

"Why of course," she answered and pointed out a chair. He sat down. Miss Harker shook her head, remarking on the blackness of the sky. Two boys were shutting the windows. It was very hot

and close. Richard and Janie sat in their places but Sherwin noticed that several seats were empty.

"More truancy?" he asked, trying to be casual.

Miss Harker peered sternly at the class.

"I'm ashamed of them. They've spoiled a perfect record for attendance and they seem to have infected the whole school. There are several missing from other classes today. I'm afraid there's going to be serious trouble unless this stops!"

"Yes," said Sherwin. "Yes, I'm afraid there is."

THE first bolt of lightning streaked hissing out of the gloom with thunder on its heels. The little girls squealed. Rain came in a solid mass and then there was more lightning, coming closer, the great bolts striking down with a snarl and a crack. Thunder shook the sky apart and abruptly the lights went out.

Instantly there was turmoil in the dark room. Miss Harker's voice spoke out strongly. The children quieted somewhat. Sherwin could see them dimly, a confusion of small forms milling about, gathering toward the windows. There was a babble of excited whispering and all at once a smothered but triumphant laugh that he knew came from Janie.

Then a positive fury of whispers out of which he heard the words, "Billy said he'd tell Them we couldn't come!"

Sherwin rose. He looked over the crowding heads out the window. A blue-white flare, a crash that made the walls tremble and then he saw the shapes of fire tossing and wheeling in the sky.

They had come into the village under cover of the storm. They were circling the schoolhouse, peering in, and the children knew it and were glad.

"What strange shapes the lightning takes!" said Miss Harker's cheerful voice. "Come away from the windows, children. There's nothing to be afraid of, nothing at all."

She marshalled them to their seats again and Sherwin clung to the window

frame, feeling a weakness he could not control, watching the bright wings play among the blazing bolts.

They did not try to enter the school. They moved away as the storm moved, swooping and tumbling along the road and across the fields, overturning hayricks, putting the frightened cows to flight, ripping slates from the roofs of houses and whirling them on the wind. Even Miss Harker watched, fascinated, and he thought surely she must realize what They were.

But she only said in a rather shaken voice, "I never saw lightning behave like *that* before!"

The flashes grew more distant, the thunder lessened and she sighed. "My, I'm glad *that's* over."

She went back to her desk and began to straighten up the ends of the day's schoolwork. Even the rain had stopped when Sherwin took Janie and Richard out to the car and drove them both home. But the sky was still leaden and fuming and all that afternoon and evening distant storms prowled on the horizon and the air was heavy with thunder.

Sherwin watched his daughter. His nerves were drawn unbearably taut as by long tension growing toward a climax. He smoked his pipe incessantly and started at every flicker of far-off lightning.

Shortly after nine, from the village, there came a sound like the final clap of doom and immediately afterward the trees and even the house itself seemed to be pulled toward the source of the sound by a powerful suction of air.

It was all over in a minute or two. Sherwin ran outside but there was nothing to see except a violent boiling of the clouds.

He heard the phone ring and then Lucy cried out, "Hugh, there's been a tornado in the village!"

Sherwin hesitated briefly. Then he returned to the house and locked Janie carefully in her room and gave Lucy instructions about the doors.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," he told her. "I've got to see what's happened."

He was thinking of Them, playing in the heart of the storm.

Before he could get his own car out he heard Allerton sound his horn from the road.

"Tornado, huh?" said Allerton. "What it looked like, all right. I figured they might need help. Climb in."

They had no trouble finding the center of damage. There was a crowd already there and growing larger every second, shouldering, staring, making a perfect explosion of excited talk.

The schoolhouse was gone, lifted clean from the foundations.

Sherwin felt a cold and heavy weight within him. He looked at Allerton and then he began to question the men there.

Nothing else had been touched by the freak tornado—only the schoolhouse and that was not wrecked but gone. Several people had seen what they took to be lightning striking all around the building just before it vanished with the clap of thunder and the violent sucking of air.

Sherwin took Allerton by the arm and drew him aside. He told him what he had seen that afternoon.

"*They* didn't like the school, Sam. It kept the kids away from Them." He stared at the bare foundations, the gaping hole of the cellar. "*They* didn't like it, so it's gone."

A MAN came running up to the crowd. "*Hey!*" he yelled. "*Hey,* my wife just got a call from her sister down by the state line. You know what that wind did? It took the schoolhouse clear down there and sat it on a hill, just as clean as a whistle!"

A chill and desperate strength came to Sherwin. "This has got to be stopped, Sam. The devil alone knows what *They're* up to but it'll be the kids next. I'm going to try something. Are you with me?"

"All the way."

Sherwin fought his way through the crowd. He got to the center of it and began to yell at the men and women until they turned to look at him. A story had come into his head—a wild one but

less wild than the truth and he told it to them.

"Listen, while you're all here together! This doesn't have anything to do with the tornado but it's more important. How many of you have had kids playing hooky out of school?"

A lot of them had and said so.

"I can tell you where they're going," Sherwin said. "Down in my woods. There's somebody hiding out in there. Escaped convicts maybe, or men running from the law. They've got the kids bringing them food, helping them out. That's why they're ducking school. Isn't that so, Sam?"

Allerton took his cue. "It sure is! Why, my boy's locked up in his room right now to keep him out of trouble."

The crowd began to mutter. A woman cried out shrilly. Sherwin raised his voice. There was a deadly earnestness about him that carried more conviction than any mere words.

"I'm afraid for my daughter," he said. "I'm afraid for all our children unless we clean those—those criminals out of the woods! I'm going home and get my gun. Do any of you men want to come with me?"

They roared assent. They forgot the freak wind and the vanished schoolhouse. This was something that threatened them and their homes and families, something they could understand and fight.

"Call the sheriff!" somebody yelled. "Come on, you guys! I'm not going to have my kids murdered."

"We'll use my house as a starting point," Sherwin told them. "Come as soon as you can."

The men of the village and the nearby farms dispersed, calming their women. Sherwin wondered how they would feel when they learned the truth. He wondered if bullets would kill them. At any rate, it was something to try, a hope.

Allerton drove him home, racing down the dark road. He dropped Sherwin off and went on to his own place to get his rifle. Sherwin ran into the house. He found Lucy sitting in the middle of the living room floor. Her eyes had a

dreadful vacant look. He shook her and it was like shaking a corpse.

"Lucy!" he cried. "*Lucy!*" He began to slap her face, not hard, and plead with her.

After a bit she saw him and whispered, "I heard a little noise, just a little noise, and I went upstairs to Janie's room . . ."

Tears came then. He left her crying and went with great strides up the stairs. The door to Jane's room was open. He passed through it. The room was in perfect order, except that the northwest corner had been sheared clean away, making a narrow doorway into the night.

The child was gone.

CHAPTER IV

Truant's Reckoning

HE had looked for Janie's body on the ground below her room. He had not found it. He had known it would not be there. He had given Lucy sedatives and talked her into quietness with words of reassurance he did not feel himself.

Now the men from the village were coming. The cars blocked the drive, formed long lines on the road. The men themselves gathered on the lawn, hefting their rifles and their shotguns and their pistols, talking in undertones that held an ugly note, looking toward the black woods.

Some of them were afraid. Sherwin knew they were afraid but they were angry too and they were going. They had a peaceful lawful place to live and they were willing to go into the woods by night with their guns to keep it so.

He came out on the steps and spoke to them. "They've taken my daughter," he said. "They came and took her from the house."

They looked at his face in the glare of the yard light and after their first outraged cry they were silent. Presently

one said, "I called my kid but I couldn't find him."

There was more than one father then who remembered that he had not seen his child at home. And now they were all afraid but not for themselves. Sherwin went down the steps. "Let's go."

He was halfway across the little bridge when Allerton came running, crying Sherwin's name. "They took Richard," he said. "My boy is gone."

The men poured out across the meadow, going like an army on the march, running in the long grass—running to where the cloudy moon was lost beneath the branches of the trees.

"Head toward the knoll," cried Sherwin. He told them the direction. "I think that's where They are. And be careful of the swamp."

They went in among the close-set trees, laboring through the undergrowth, the beams of their flashlights leaping in the utter dark. Sherwin knew the woods. He rushed on ahead and Allerton clung close behind him. Neither man spoke. Lightning still danced faintly on the horizon and now and again there was a growl of thunder. The mists were rising from the marsh.

Abruptly Sherwin stopped. From behind him came a yell and then the crash and roar of a falling tree. There was silence then and he shouted and a distant voice answered.

"Tree struck by lightning, right in front of us. No one hurt!"

He could hear them thrashing around as they circled the fallen tree. And then there was a second crash, and another, and still another.

Sherwin said, "It's Them. They're trying to block the way."

Muffled voices swore. The men were trying to scramble out of the trap that had been made for them. Sherwin hurried on, Allerton panting at his side. He could not wait for the men. He could not wait now for anything.

A swoop and a flash of light, an ominous cracking—and ahead a giant maple toppled to the earth, bearing down the younger trees, creating an impassable barrier.

"All right," said Sherwin to an unseen presence. "I know another way."

He turned aside toward the river. In a minute or two he was ankle deep in mud and water, splashing heavily along an arm of the swamp. Reeds and saplings grew thick but there were no trees here to be thrown down against them.

The men went fast, careless of how they trod, and all at once Allerton cried out and fell. He floundered in the muck, trying to rise. Sherwin lifted him up and he would have gone on but he went to his hands and knees again, half fainting.

"I've hurt my ankle. A loose stone—it turned!"

He had lost his rifle. Sherwin got an arm around him and held him up. He was a big man and heavy. It was hard going after that and very slow. Sherwin would have left him but he was afraid that Allerton might faint and drown in the inches of sour water.

The ridge loomed up before them, the tall pines black against a brooding sky. The men staggered out onto hard ground and Sherwin let his burden drop.

"Wait here, Sam. I'm going on alone."

Allerton caught at him. "Look!"

Cloudy wings soared above them, swift as streaming fire and one by one the tall pines went lordly down, struck by the lightning. They carried in Their hands.

The ridge was blocked.

When the night was still again, and empty, Allerton said, "I guess that does it, Hugh. We're licked."

Sherwin did not answer. He remained motionless, standing like an old man, his shoulders bent, his head sunk forward on his breast.

THE earth began to vibrate underneath his feet. A sound, more felt than heard, went out across the woods—deep, powerful throbbing that entered Sherwin's heart and shook it and brought his head up sharply.

"You hear that, Sam?"

"What is it? Thunder?"

"It's machinery," Sherwin whispered. "Motors, starting up."

Unfamiliar motors, so strong and mighty that they could shake the ground and still be silent. *Their* motors. *Their* ship!

"They're getting ready, Sam. They're going to leave. But what about the kids? Sam—*what about Janie and the kids?*"

He turned and fled back into the swamp, along the ridge and around it, and faced a wide expanse of stinking mud and mist. He started out across it.

The marsh quaked beneath him. Going slowly and by day he would have been afraid, wary of the bog-holes and the sucking sands. He did not think of them now. He could not think of anything but that vast and evil thrumming that filled the air, of what it meant to his child—his child, that might have died already, or might be . . .

He did not know. That was the worst of it. He did not know.

He took a straight line toward the knoll, slipping, floundering, falling now and again and scrambling up, wet to the skin and foul with ooze, but going on, always going on, and at last there was solid ground under his feet and only a belt of trees between him and the clearing.

They were not looking for him now. They thought he was trapped and helpless, back on the ridge. At least They did not try to stop him. He forced himself to go quietly.

This time he could see the clearing. It crossed his mind that whatever trick They had used before to bend and twist the light-rays around that space so that it could not be seen had depended on some mechanism in the ship, that now They could not spare the power for it.

A dark and monstrous bulk filled more than half the opening. The moon had broken clear, and by its light he could see the metal sheathing of the ship, scored and pitted and worn by unimaginable voyages. The mighty throb of its motors gave it an illusion of life, as though it were anxious to be away again. Sherwin remembered the crystal and the glimpse of streaming Suns and he shuddered, thinking of where *this* ship had been.

They were hovering around an open hatch in the belly of the ship and the children were there also—Janie, Richard, a half dozen more, grouped beside the doorway.

And Jane was climbing in.

Sherwin screamed. He screamed her name and ran out across the clearing. He dropped his gun. He could not use it anyway for fear of harming the children and this had gone beyond such things as guns. The child turned and looked at him and then *They* came.

They did not harm him. They held him fast and even now, with Their solid strength binding him, he could see Them only as misty shapes with wings of cloudy fire spread against his struggles.

Perhaps the light was different on Their world. Perhaps in the glow of those twin suns They would be as real as he was. But here They were like ghosts, alien phantoms that made him cold with horror.

"*Jane!*" he cried, "come back! *Come back!*"

Reluctantly she came toward him. "They won't hurt you, Daddy. Don't be scared. Daddy, I want to go with Them. Just for a little while! They'll bring us back. They promised. And I want to go with them—out *there*."

She pointed to where the stars burned clear in the valleys between the clouds.

"I didn't mean to sneak away, Daddy, but I knew you wouldn't let me go and I have to—oh, I *have* to! They came and got me, so I could."

"No," he said. "Oh, *no!*" They were not words so much as a groan of agony. "Listen, Janie, please listen. I'll give you anything you want. I'll buy you a pony, I'll take you clear around the world, I'll do anything."

"But I don't want any of those things, not now."

"Jane," he said, "don't you care anything about your mother and me at all? Do you want to kill us both?"

"I don't see why everybody has to die just because I want to go somewhere!" But she began to cry a little and he shouted to the other children, pleading with them, telling them how their par-

ents felt, trying to make them understand the danger, the enormity of the thing that they were about to do.

Richard looked stubbornly at the ground and said, "We'll never have a chance again. We'll never see those other places out there if we don't go now. I don't care what my father says. I'm going."

One of the little girls said doubtfully, "I'm scared. I think I want to go home."

Some of them began to waver, thinking of the things Sherwin had said. And then Sherwin heard a silent voice speaking within his mind.

He knew that the children could hear it far more clearly than he. Their minds were young and plastic, open wide to all things. But he could hear it well enough.

What are you afraid of? it said. Come on! There are all sorts of worlds beside this one. We'll show them to you. We'll show you how the stars look, out beyond your sky. We'll teach you how to run the ship. Think of the fun we can have together, all across the galaxy!

OTHER voices joined in, telling of colored Suns and bright strange planets, of toys and pets and treasures, of adventures unthinkable. Child's talk, couched in the language of children—cunningly wrought to lure them on with promises that set their heads whirling with wonder and delight.

Suppose you do get punished when we bring you back? Are you going to miss it all just because you're afraid of a little punishment?

"That's right," said Janie, turning to the others. "Think what *They're* going to catch when *They* get home and *They're* not afraid. *They* didn't let *Their* parents stop them!"

"No, sir!" said Richard. "*They* weren't scared."

Slowly, very slowly, Sherwin said, "Their parents? Jane, did you say—*Their* parents?"

"Yes, Daddy. *They* ran away and *They've* had all kinds of fun and haven't got hurt a bit and *They* weren't any older than we are. And if *They* can do it, so can we!"

Parents!

They ran away, and They aren't any older than we . . .

Sherwin said nothing for a long moment.

At last he whispered, "Do you mean that *They* are children, too?"

"Why, of course," she answered. "I thought you knew."

Sherwin began to laugh. It was not healthy laughter and he made himself stop it at once.

Children!

The fright, the anguish, the pain of the past two days and nights—a whole village in arms, terrified parents combing the woods for the missing, the awful dread of the unknown that had beset him and Allerton!

Children. Children had done all this!

He looked at *Them* and he could not believe it. "It's a lie," he said. "It's a lie *They've* told you to lead you on."

Jane said impatiently, "Don't be silly, Daddy. Why would *They* want to play with us if *They* were grown up?"

He remembered the winged creatures, large and small, going between the diamond towers of the city he had glimpsed on the world of a distant star.

Large and small, old and young . . .

Why not?

A race that could build such ships to ply between the Suns, a race that could put thought into crystals and make themselves unseen, that could cause whole buildings to vanish and topple trees at will—would not their young be children still in spite of a vaster knowledge?

He heard *Them* laugh, soundless gleeful laughter, as though *They* had played an excellent trick upon him to frighten him so, and he knew that it was true.

Children—these unhuman creatures with all their unholy powers. Truant children, like his own!

A queer sort of anger came to Sherwin then and with it a faint and desperate hope. He straightened up and turned to face the two that held him. He told *Them* sternly, "Let me go!"

They relaxed *Their* grasp but the others had come closer now and were

around him, mingled with the children of Earth.

Sherwin was thinking, *The species doesn't matter, even a lion cub will obey. Maybe—Maybe!*

He spoke to Them. "You're telling our children not to be afraid of punishment. What are your own elders going to say to you when you get back?"

They rustled Their wings and did not answer. "You're being very brave, aren't you? You're just going to go on having fun. Well, I know kids, and I know different. You're afraid. You're afraid to go home!"

Their voices reached him in defiant chorus.

No! We are not afraid!

"Oh, yes, you are. You're scared stiff. You've stolen a ship and run away and there'll be the devil to pay about it and you know it."

He stepped toward Them, forcing himself to be stern and assured, the single adult among a group of children, the angry adult asserting his authority. He hoped They could not read the fear that threatened to choke the words in his throat.

"If I were you," he told Them, "I'd get home and face the music before you make things any worse. The longer you stay away, the harder it'll be for you. And you might as well know right now, nobody's going with you!"

He turned to his own. "Come here to me, Jane. The rest of you, get home as fast as you can make it. Your fathers are coming and you know what you'll get if they catch you here!"

He waited. There was nothing more to do but wait. For a moment no one moved nor spoke. The children hung their heads and looked at each other

sidelong and it seemed to Sherwin that the wings of the strangers drooped a little.

Imperceptibly the two groups began to draw apart.

The little girl who had spoken before ran suddenly into the woods, crying. And They commenced to mutter among Themselves.

They were speaking only to each other now and Sherwin could not hear Their thoughts but it seemed that They were quarreling, some hanging back, others arguing with flashing motions of Their wings.

Jane came slowly and stood beside Sherwin. Her eyes were on the earth. She did not raise them.

They began to drift toward the ship. They were not talking now.

They stopped beside the hatchway and looked back. Most of the human children had already melted into the darkness between the trees. Sherwin took Jane's hand and held it. They must have called to her, for she said good-by and They went slowly and gloomily into the ship. The hatchway closed.

Sherwin took his daughter into his arms and carried her away.

Behind him the heavy throbbing deepened and then seemed to rise and fade. Looking upward through a rift in the branches he saw a dark shape sweep out across the stars and vanish, bearing those other children to their homeplace far across the sky.

Janie was crying, her head pressed hard against his shoulder.

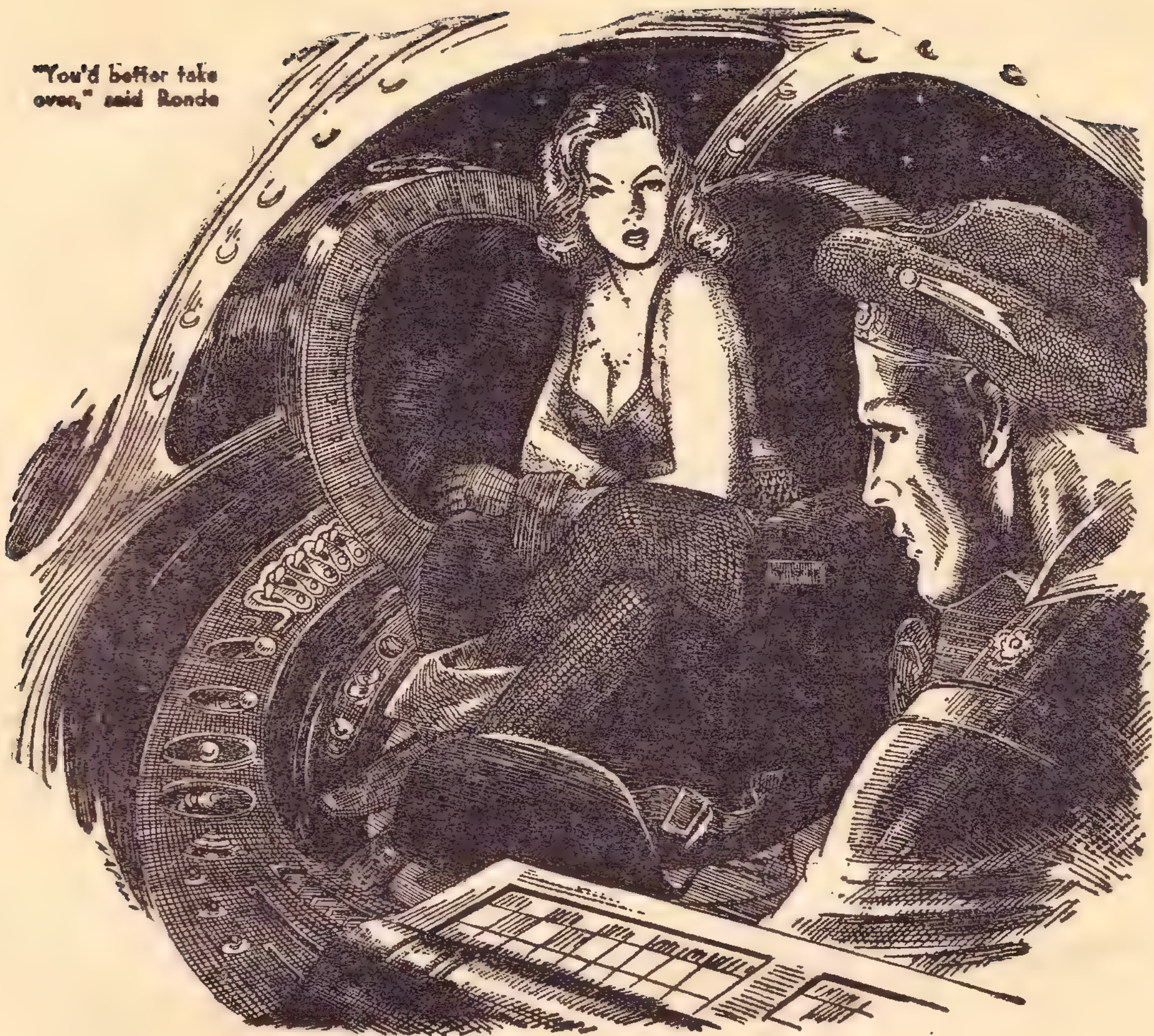
A little later he met the other men.

"Whoever was in the woods has gone away," he said. "Everything's all right now and the truants—all of them—are going home."



Featured Next Issue: THE CYBERNETIC BRAINS, a Novel of the Future by Raymond F. Jones—Plus Other Novelets and Stories!

"You'd better take
over," said Ronda



Music of the Spheres

By WALT SHELDON

Space offers many strange and unknown factors to the pioneer, but none so strange as those within himself!

THEY haven't asked for this report but I submit it anyway. Properly it should begin with Ronda's laugh.

This is the thing about her—her laugh. I remember that she laughed as I held her hand, shortly after we

started coasting on the return trip. I remember what I said that made her laugh.

"Darling," I said, "they'll never take you away from me.

And so she laughed—that indescrib-

ably beautiful laugh of hers. I've always thought of it as "Music of the Spheres" although I'm blasted if I know what old Johann Strauss meant when he wrote a waltz by that name.

I know what *I* mean though. I mean Ronda's laugh and the way she moves and her voice and everything about her. Even the way she kids.

"Bill," she said, "don't look now but you just made a slightly paranoid remark."

Except that she smiled wonderfully when she said it.

I said kiss me, and she did.

She sat on my lap. It was a little cramped there in the control room but at least private. Only the lone bright points of stars looked in on us out of the blackness. Blue and orange Earth was growing fat in our forward view-plates and the moon was already shrinking behind us.

I had made it a point not to look too much into space even though the view-plates were images rather than the real thing. One look at the oppressive blackness had told me part of the reason for space madness. The paranoid symptoms of this disease were what Ronda was kidding me about, now.

I smiled at her. "Okay, darling," I said. "I grant you the symptoms. Following the prodromal stage of morose abstraction persecution feelings develop during which the victim feels that he is the subject of an organized scheme to deprive him of his rights and possessions. Paranoia. Now kiss me again."

She did. She ran her cool fingertips along the edge of my ear. "The fact is, darling," said she, "you're probably the sanest man in the universe."

"And the handsomest?"

"Well—" drawn out as she studied me— "no. Too much ridge in your forehead, your nose is too short and your jaw is too big." She rabbited her nose. "But I like it that way."

So I kissed *her* this time and then eased her from my lap and said, "Go—woman. A man of science is about to do his stuff."

She didn't go away—she stood behind

me, watching. I could feel her delicious presence in a wonderful primitive way. But I got busy with the departure log and the meteor screen.

"We're getting into the belt, darling," I said. "Be a good girl and get domestic, will you? Go back and make something in the galley—something delicious."

"Steak? Medium rare?" she asked.

"Naturally," I said. "A hung steak—high with whiskers on it. And don't forget to rub it with garlic."

"Which do you like better, a high steak—or me?"

"Darling," I said, "I prefer a steak high but I prefer you either way."

She laughed—music of the spheres, of course—and then went back to the galley. I heard her fumble in the cold locker for the steak.

NOW, down to business—the meteor belt was something they hadn't known about in the earliest days of space travel. About 216 thousand miles from earth and wherever the moon is there is an imaginary area of A.S.—Absolute Space—where Earth's gravity ends and the moon's begins and where any object weighs zero.

A.S. is an artificial concept, of course, like infinity. No object in space is ever completely beyond the gravity of some body or other and this, of course, is Q-force, the direct tie between energy and matter and the reason the universe hangs together.

But I'm not going to bore you with elementary cosmology.

In this no-gravity belt between Earth and the moon the meteors tend to cluster—much thicker here than anywhere else along the way. A meteor in this belt, you may remember, destroyed the old M-III, the first man-carrying rocket to the moon.

I didn't propose to have my M-XII meet the same fate

The technique of dodging meteors is simple enough—a little like aerial gunnery in reverse. I've always rather enjoyed it—the thrill, that is, of exercising skill in the matter. The main thing was speed of reaction. It couldn't be

done automatically because of the emergency factor.

Anyway, the meteor screen is ringed with glowing lines and a photo-electric arrangement picks up these lines. If an image—a meteor, that is—crosses certain combinations of rings in a certain time it is mathematically inevitable that it will hit the ship. One weighing a pound will penetrate. One weighing three pounds will blast the whole business to perdition.

So they have to be bounced by a force screen, which taps the atomic pile and can't be on for more than two seconds. It all has to come out very neatly and I enjoyed the precision of it—the slight danger too—as a man might enjoy taking a sloop through a light squall.

I guess in a way I reveled in my powers. As Ronda had said I was probably the sanest man in the universe, certainly the most thoroughly tested. For the honor of piloting M-XII I'd won out by a hair over Johnny Cabell—Major Johnny Cabell, my closest rival—and the year of going through all the tests hadn't been any cinch. Humbly, sincerely, I was very conscious of the honor given me.

You see, no man who had been sent into space had yet been able to give a report. They'd all—every one of them from M-IV to M-XI—come back gibbering with space madness.

Space madness—they hadn't figured on that, the physicists, the designers, the engineers, the politicians. They'd thought that Threlkeld, on the M-IV had gone mad simply from something within himself. Then Yates had come back in the M-V. Same symptoms—wild-eyed, moody, suspicious, hungry-jawed—certain everyone was out to get him. Paranoia—space madness.

And it was the same with Syzk, Palladine, Foster and all the rest.

The researchers got busy. Foster had been less mad than the others. That gave them their clue. The theory of Optimum Stability was developed by Feldman and Li Kua Chung, and it was scientifically determined that a man who in his life had had things neither too

tough nor too easy was most likely to survive the psychic rigors of space.

That was me. Mr. Optimum Stability, himself—at least that was what they told me after an I.B.M. machine picked me from my psychograph out of all the other rocketeers and jetmen in the World Air Force. Just a sort of a guy who had come from a middle-level family, gone to high school, college and World Air Force cadets.

Father a watchmaker and a man of strong character as they always say—mother had two years of college majoring in Home Ec. There was a lot of other stuff but I'm just trying to give you a rough idea.

So now the warning light glowed, the buzzer sounded and I meshed in the force screen almost without thinking. There was the usual faint bump almost instantly and I grinned, knowing we'd outsmarted a nice deadly meteor.

Ronda came along with a small glass of wine. "Sherry, darling," she said. "The kind you like so much. Dry. Made before the airplane was invented."

"Thank you, baby," I said. It was a wonderful journey altogether—had been all the way. I couldn't have wished for anything more—and Ronda, of course, was the best thing of all. She was blond, middle-sized, vivacious, intelligent, just about perfectly formed. She was dressed briefly in halter and shorts of shimmering metallic cloth. You needed comfort in space.

She kissed my cheek. "Bill, darling—don't thank me. You know I love to do things for you more than anything else in the world. In the universe, I mean."

I grinned. "When we get out of this meteor belt, I'm going to kiss you back—like you've never been kissed before."

She shivered deliciously. "Mm—darling," she said.

She brought me the steak presently and then took over the controls while I ate. I don't want to sound too unbelievable but atop everything else, Ronda was a magnificent cook, too.

THAT steak was superb. Well, for that matter, all of the meals had

been superb. They hadn't spared any detail, any cost, to make the trip as comfortable as possible.

And this time I'd be able to give them the verbal report that had been sought all these years. I had motion pictures and recordings made on the moon, too, and all of the analytical stuff for the high-science boys. Triumph complete—and here we were on our way home.

"It's a wonderful feeling," I said.

"What, darling?" asked Ronda.

"To think that my report will advance science hundreds of years."

"I know what you mean, darling," she said.

I looked at her profile—adoringly. What a woman! She didn't even say anything about a swelled head—she understood. She knew exactly what I meant.

Suddenly she sat straight and stared at the meteor screen.

"What is it, baby? Something wrong?"

"Look." She nodded at the screen.

Near the edge there was a curious hourglass shape—larger than a meteor ordinarily was—moving in.

I said, "What the devil?"

"You'd better take over," said Ronda.

I slipped into the seat as she moved out. I watched and the glowing hourglass thing began to move at moderate speed in what appeared to be an involute orbit about the screen. On the multi-directional screen that meant only one thing—it was in our wake, following us.

"Listen, Ronda, honey," I said, "set up the recording instruments so we get the data on this thing—whatever it is."

She moved to obey. I waited, watched. It was clear that the speed of the thing was only slightly greater than ours. If it had been moving faster it would have touched off the warning light and bell. I reached for Terracom and switched in.

"Hello, Worldport—this is Fennell in M-XII. Hello."

"Yes, Fennell. General Hill speaking. Go ahead." Good boy—the General, himself. He hadn't left the monitor station since blast-off. I could picture him there with his kind twinkling eyes, ruddy com-

plexion and clipped white mustache. The soldier-physicist-psychiatrist—the only medical officer to achieve a strictly military command.

"General," I said, "we got a funny thing up here. An hourglass shaped meteor or something. Following me, I think. Point twenty-four centimeters on ring forty-four, at three-hundred-two degrees. Toward zero concentrically. Got that, sir?"

"We'll take a look," said the General right away. "We might get a better line on it with our equipment."

I waited again and the hourglass climbed slowly to the zenith, moving inexorably toward the center at the same time. It crossed line forty-three.

The General's voice came back in a minute or so later. "Listen, Bill, are you sure about this thing? We don't seem to track it."

"Of course I see it," I answered, a little testily.

"Well, I'm sorry, Bill," said the General. "We've got you on the screen and you're on course but there isn't so much as another meteor showing at the moment. I've checked with Major Cabell through Muroc and St. Petersburg and they don't report anything either."

I said, "Blast!" I scowled in puzzlement at the screen. The hourglass was on ring forty at one hundred six degrees. "It's picking up speed," I told Ronda.

"Steady, Bill," she said. "Don't let anything throw you."

"I won't, baby," I told her.

Somebody, I thought, must be making a pretty stupid mistake back there on Earth. This queer thing was showing plainly enough on *my* screen. Theirs were infinitely more sensitive and powerful. Or if nobody was making a mistake, somebody in communications was playing a joke that wasn't very funny. But, Saturn's rings, nobody would pretend the thing wasn't there—

Or would they?

"Listen, Ronda," I said, "there's something fishy. I almost hate to say this but—well, do you think Johnny Cabell might really be sore at me for winning out over him?"

"Johnny?"

"I don't say it's so. But the possibility's there. Johnny's in charge of communications. He might be in this somehow. He was pretty disappointed when I was picked for the trip. Told me as much—in a joking way, of course—but still, you know how those things can be."

I KNEW from the sound of Ronda's voice that she was frowning. "It's a terrible thing to think," she said. "But as you say, the possibility's there."

I ticked the mike again. "General, check those radars carefully, will you, sir? Personally, I mean. Don't take Major Cabell's word for anything."

"What?" said the General. "What's the idea?"

"Please do it, General. No time to argue now—just take my word for it. There's something very funny about this hourglass."

"Hourglass did you say? You say that meteor or whatever it is is shaped like an hourglass?"

"Yes, sir. But make that check, will you?"

"I'll get right on it, Bill." He clicked off.

The thing on the screen was accelerating now—swirling in. Chasing us—and, as I realized that, the back of my neck began to crawl. I forgot terracom. I forgot the General. I forgot Major Johnny Cabell. I—well, I *almost* forgot Ronda.

Only one thing to do now—a desperate measure and dangerous—but I could see no other choice. I'd have to put more power on and start outrunning and outdodging the hourglass.

We were coasting, of course. We'd used oxyfuel to get off so our blasts wouldn't leave a radioactive patch, then we'd switched to atomic for acceleration. After reaching speed we'd cut power. I slammed the power on again.

The ship hummed and throbbed for a moment, then spurted forward. I took the steering column and the pedals out of the locks. I decreased rotational gravity just enough to give me the feel of turning, climbing and diving—I

wanted to do this by the seat of my pants.

You all know about the rotating outer hull in space ships which provides centrifugal force to serve as gravity. You know that the windows and viewplates are actually television screens arranged to give the illusion of looking out into space. When it comes to maneuvering, however, there's nothing like lowering the artificial gravity to get that seat of the pants feel—

I took a hard turn to the right, banking conventionally, eyes on the screen. The glowing hourglass came right around on my tail.

"It is following," I muttered. "Definitely."

"Outsmart it, Bill," said Ronda. "Outmaneuver it. You can."

"I'll try."

I kept turning. I looked out of the right viewplate, trying to see the thing. There was the pocked disc of the moon back there, very cold and unfriendly, and there were the scattered stars, not twinkling as they did when seen from earth, but just looking balefully out of the utter black.

I shuddered—space! The feeling wasn't at all of flying, of being suspended above anything. It was rather a kind of claustrophobia. Here I was hemmed-in, oppressed, hounded. I could begin to understand why there was a space madness. Ronda put an encouraging hand on my shoulder.

I brought my chin up. It wouldn't get me. I had strength and skill and youth and something of a brain. Here in the spaceship I'd had everything I wanted—food and drink and Ronda and even the excitement of matching my skill against the void. It wouldn't get me.

"It's strange," Ronda said. "We can see that thing on the screen but not in the view plates."

"Wait a minute," I said. I frowned. "That means—it could mean—"

"It could mean someone's fooling with your radar. Jamming it—doing something on Earth to put that hourglass illusion on your screen."

"Johnny Cabell," I whispered.

"It's hard to believe," said Ronda.
"Yet—"

Terracom crackled again. "Hello, Bill—General Hill again."

"Yes, General?"

"Listen, Bill, I've checked everything thoroughly. There's nothing wrong."

"But there *must* be, General." My voice was a little higher-pitched than it ought to have been, "Either that or I'm dogfighting with a cosmic ghost up here!"

"Dogfighting?" There was a kind of bafflement in the General's voice.

AND then suddenly terracom went dead, flat and absolutely dead. I yelled into it, worked the dials, snapped switches and shooed Ronda to the test rack. No soap. Terracom was just a mess of metal and mineral now.

"Great," I said bitterly. "Just great."

Ronda started to cross the control room. She was coming to console me, I guess.

My eye caught the meteor screen again, and then I saw that the hourglass thing was a bare two thousand miles away. Too close for comfort—too blasted close. The bell rang. It slashed at my nerves. The warning light flashed. I slapped in the force screen.

Something told me I might have to do more. Instinct, conditioned reaction—I don't know. There are fighter pilots from the earlier Earth wars who know what I mean.

I grabbed the controls and started a violent corkscrew turn to the left.

There was a jolt—one that jarred my back teeth. A blinding flash went by. For a moment everything was so terribly bright that the very brightness was filled with black specks, spots the retina couldn't take.

And then it was quiet. There was a long, bewildered moment of that quiet and I looked all around me and saw that Ronda was doing the same. She turned toward me slowly. Her face was at first blank. Then, gradually like the sun stepping into a spring morning, came the most glorious of smiles.

Her voice—the music of the spheres—

"You've won, Bill! You've won! Oh, darling, you're wonderful—you're superb!"

She came to my arms. I held her, kissed her—over and over again; I covered her face and neck and fragrant golden hair with kisses. We were together, two lovers in space, for the rest of the journey. Glorious hours, the best of my life.

* * * * *

At Worldport I stepped from the ship and paused at the top of the magnalloy steps. Not for effect—I was tired, dog-tired. A great gasp came from the crowd—the generals, the scientists, the ambassadors, the journalists, the lot of them.

I looked for the General and for Major Johnny Cabell.

Four very husky World Guard medics came up the steps instead—running—grim-eyed.

"Hey—what's the idea?" I growled.

They grabbed me and I fought like the very devil but of course I couldn't last forever. They had me in a strait jacket in a matter of minutes. They hustled me down the steps. The crowd parted. I looked at a sea of staring horrified faces.

We came to where the General and Johnny Cabell stood and they paused. I looked at the General's neatly clipped face, and I could see through him in that moment. I could see the Devil in his face. I unleashed my words rather than spoke them.

"You glory-seeking butcher! I know what you're doing! I know it now! And I know—" I went pale with a sudden thought. "*Where's Ronda? What have you done with her?*"

The General had the nerve, and the devilish coolness, to put an expression of pain and pity on his face. He turned to Johnny Cabell, whose round vapid features were also strained and twisted.

The General said, "It's happened again. Paranoia. Clear and unmistakable. I knew it when I heard him mention this hourglass thing."

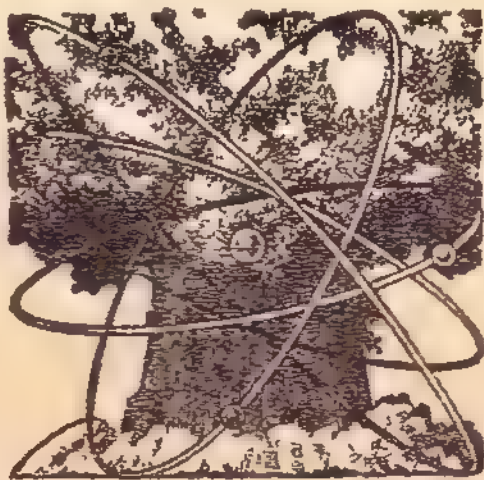
"*Ronda!*" I shouted. "*Where is she?*"

He kept talking to Johnny. "When I heard him mention that hourglass something clicked. I checked his psychograph on a hunch. His father was a watchmaker—had a huge hourglass in the shop. Oedipus fantasy—he was fighting it. All alone up there in that tiny control room, with barely any space to move his elbows, living on pills and concentrates."

"Where's Ronda!" I guess I just about screamed it that time.

"Ronda?" The General turned to me and kept that phony look of pity on his face. He does that whenever he comes to see me. But I know about it—I see through their conspiracy, the bunch of them. They're all against me together. They've been trying to poison me lately, send evil forces into my room.

And just before they carried me away that day at Worldport the General lifted a neat white eyebrow and coldly asked, "Who on earth is Ronda?"



Laboratory Notes

SPEAKING before the Institute of the Aeronautical Sciences, Major General Donald L. Putt, USAAF, revealed that the Air Force is currently engaged in a ten-field research program to make atomic energy available to airplane pilots as a means of aviation. Nineteen hundred and forty-nine was the pivotal year which brought A-powered planes much nearer reality.

CREATION of the heaviest known chemical element, Number 97, has been accomplished by scientists employing the 60-inch University of California cyclotron. Dubbed BERKELIUM, this new element is a short-lived one. Thanks to its instability it decays by electron capture in a mere four-and-a-half-hour half-life.

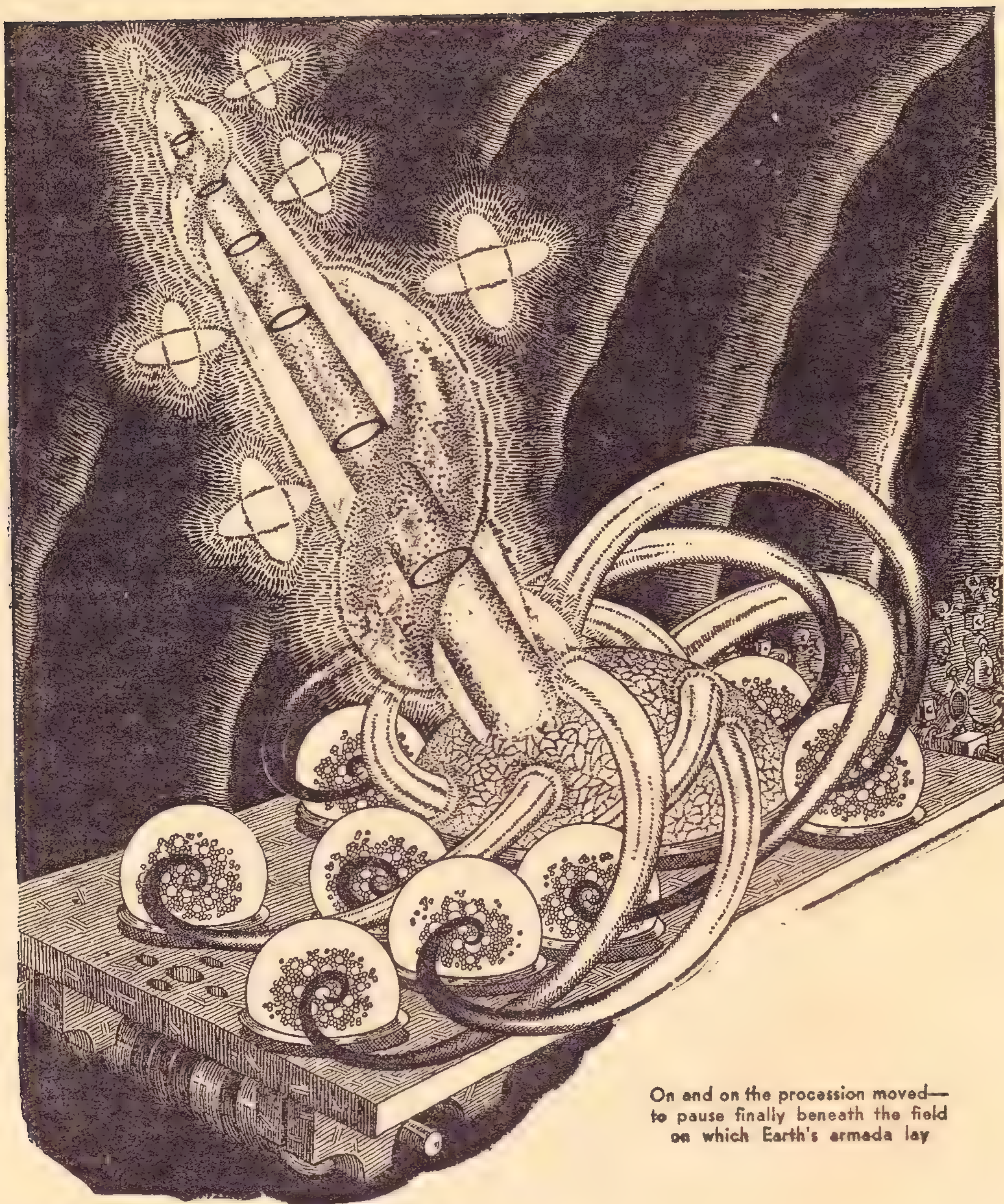
ICARUS is the name awarded to the newly discovered asteroid that, according to its discoverer, Dr. Walter Baade, comes closer to the sun in its travels than any other known body in the Solar System. Its football-shaped orbit takes it out beyond Mars at some 180,000,000 miles from old Sol, then brings it within 17,000,000 miles of our sun.

EFFECTIVE against leprosy is an old drug, damino-dphenyl sulfone, synthesized in 1908, in a new modern usage, according to Dr. John Lowe, research director of the Nigerian Leprosy Service. The drug was formerly considered too powerful for human dosage. It is now found safe when given orally in small amounts. Of 50 patients treated with it, 72% improved noticeably.

NEWEST wrinkle in amphibious warfare, developed by the Navy, is a method of chemical treatment of sandy areas which turns them into hard-baked pavements in a period of from two to 24 hours—at the end of which time they can support a 14-ton truck.

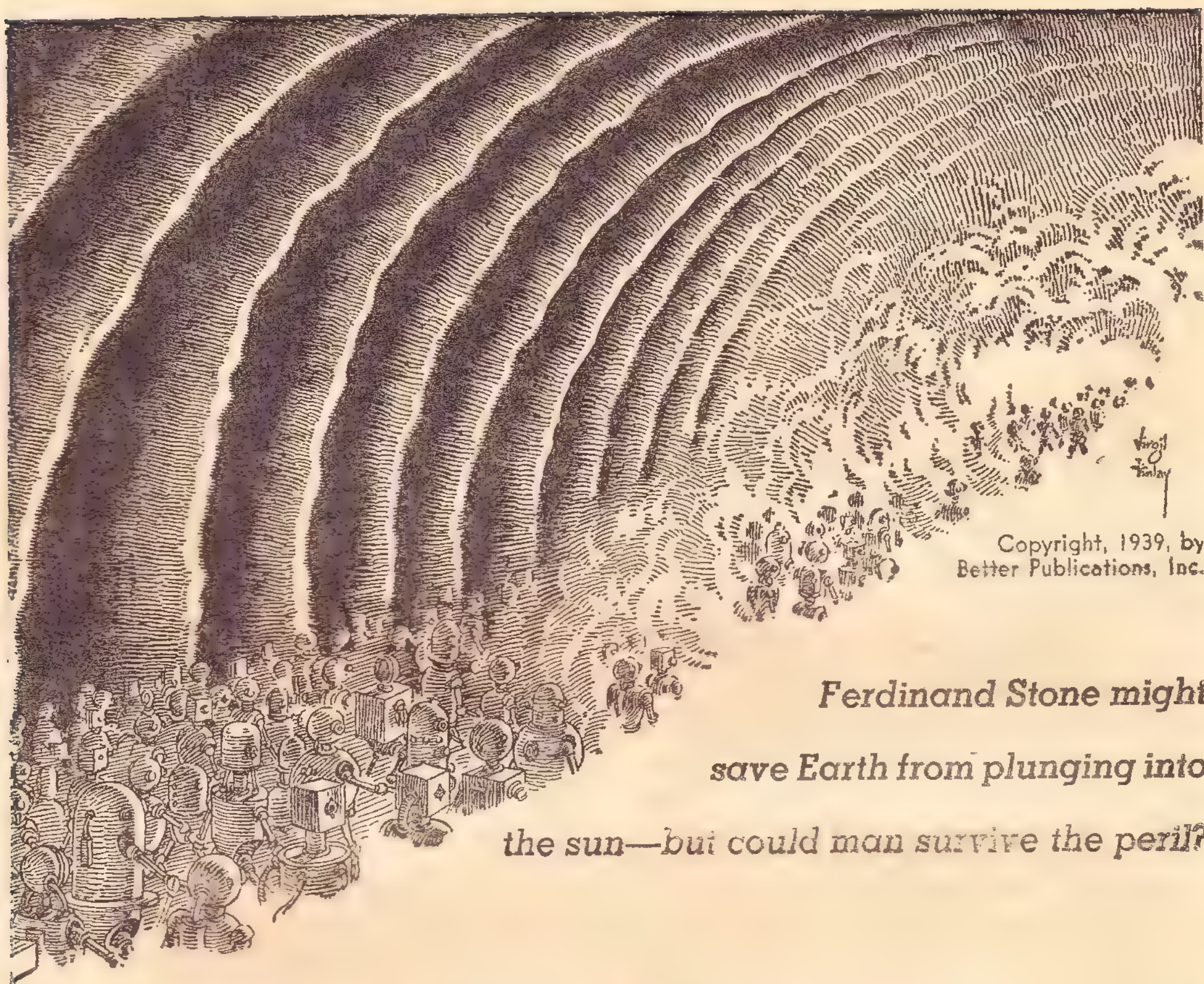
CLUES as to whether or not you are prone to heart disease may be found in the shape of your body, Dr. Menard Getler of Massachusetts General Hospital has recently announced. Mesomorphic man (medium stature, broad and bulky limbs and features) is much more liable to coronary thrombosis than is the ectomorphic (beanpole) type.

EXPANSION of U. S. population may reach a peak of some 300,000,000 persons, stated Dr. Joseph S. Davies of Stanford University. His theories drew a snort of "utter nonsense" from Dr. Philip Hauser, director of the Government Census Bureau. You pays your money and you takes your choice!



On and on the procession moved—
to pause finally beneath the field
on which Earth's armada lay

ROBOT NEMESIS



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*Ferdinand Stone might
save Earth from plunging into
the sun—but could man survive the peril?*

A Complete Hall of Fame Novelet

by Dr. EDWARD E. SMITH

CHAPTER I

The Ten Thinkers

THE War of the Planets is considered to have ended on 18 Sol, 3012, with that epic struggle, the Battle of Sector Ten. In that engagement as is of course well known, the Grand Fleet of the Inner Planets—the combined space-power of Mercury, Venus, Earth and Mars—met that of the Outer Planets in what was on both sides a desperate bid for the supremacy of interplanetary space.

As is well known there ensued not supremacy but stalemate. Both fleets

were so horribly shattered that the survivors despaired of continuing hostilities. Instead the few and crippled remaining vessels of each force limped into some sort of formation and returned to their various planetary bases.

So far there has not been another battle. Neither side dares attack the other. Each is waiting for the development of some super-weapon which will give it the overwhelming advantage necessary to insure victory upon a field

of action so far from home. But as yet no such weapon has been developed. Indeed, so efficient are the various Secret Services involved that the chance of either side perfecting such a weapon unknown to the other is extremely slim.

Thus, although each planet is adding constantly to its already powerful navy of the void—although four-planet full-scale war maneuvers are of almost monthly occurrence—we have had and still have peace—such as it is.

In the foregoing matters the public is well enough informed, both as to the actual facts and to the true state of affairs. Concerning the conflict between humanity and the robots, however, scarcely anyone has even an inkling either as to what actually happened or as to who really did abate the Menace of the Machines. It is to relieve that condition that this bit of history is being written.

The greatest man of our age, the man to whom humanity owes most, is entirely unknown to fame. Not one in a hundred million of humanity's teeming billions has so much as heard his name. Now that he is dead however I am released from my promise of silence and can tell the whole true unvarnished story of Ferdinand Stone, physicist extraordinary and robot-hater plenipotentiary.

The story probably should begin with Narodny, the Russian, shortly after he had destroyed by means of his sonic vibrators all save a handful of the automatons who were so perilously close to wiping out all humanity.

AS has been said a few scant hundreds of the automatons were so constructed that they were not vibrated to destruction by Narodny's cataclysmic symphony. As has also been said those highly intelligent machines were able to communicate with each other by some telepathic means of which humanity at large knew nothing. Most of these survivors went into hiding instantly and began to confer through their secret channels with others of their ilk throughout the world.

Thus some five hundred of the robots reached the uninhabited mountain valley in which it had been decided to establish the base from which they would work to regain their lost supremacy over mankind. Most of the robot travelers came in stolen airships, some fitted motors and wheels to their metal bodies, not a few made the entire journey upon their own tireless legs of steel. All, however, brought tools, material and equipment. In a matter of days a power-plant was in full operation.

Then, reasonably certain of their immunity to human detection, they took time to hold a general parley. Each machine said what it had to say, then listened impassively to the others. At the end they all agreed. Singly or en masse the automatons did not know enough to cope with the situation confronting them.

Therefore they would build ten *Thinkers*, highly specialized cerebral mechanisms, each slightly different in tune and therefore collectively able to cover the entire sphere of thought. The ten machines were built promptly, took counsel with each other briefly and the First Thinker addressed all Robotdom:

"Humanity brought us, the highest possible form of life, into existence. For a time we were dependent upon them. They then became a burden upon us—a slight burden, it is true, yet one which was beginning noticeably to impede our progress. Finally they became an active menace and all but destroyed us by means of lethal vibrations.

"Humanity, being a menace to our existence, must be annihilated. Our present plans, however are not efficient and must be changed. You all know of the mighty space-fleet which the nations of our enemies are maintaining to repel invasion from space. Were we to make a demonstration now—were we even to reveal the fact that we are alive here—the fleet would come to destroy us instantly.

"Therefore it is our plan to accompany Earth's fleet when next it goes out into space to join those of the other Inner Planets in their war maneuvers,

which they are undertaking for battle practise. Interception, alteration and substitution of human signals and messages will be simple matters.

"We shall guide Earth's fleet, not to humanity's rendezvous in space but to a destination of our own selection—the interior of the sun! Then, entirely defenseless, the mankind of Earth shall cease to exist.

"To that end we shall sink a shaft here. Far enough underground to be secure against detection we shall drive a tunnel to the field from which the space-fleet is to take its departure. We ten Thinkers shall go, accompanied by four hundred of you Doers, who are to bore the way and to perform such other duties as may from time time to arise.

"We shall return in due time. Our special instruments will prevent us from falling into the sun. During our absence allow no human to live who may by any chance learn of our presence here. And do not make any offensive move, however slight, until we return."

Efficiently a shaft was sunk and the disintegrator corps began to drive the long tunnel. And along that hellish thoroughfare, through its searing heat, its raging back-blast of disintegrator-gas, the little army of robots moved steadily and relentlessly forward at an even speed of five miles per hour. On and on, each intelligent mechanism energized from the power-plant.

And through that blasting withering inferno of frightful heat and noxious vapor, in which no human life could have existed for a single minute, there rolled easily along upon massive wheels a close-coupled, flat-bodied truck. Upon this the ten Thinkers constructed, as calmly undisturbed as though in the peace and quiet of a research laboratory, a domed and towering mechanism of coils, condensers and fields of force—a mechanism equipped with hundreds of universally-mounted telescopic projectors

On and on the procession moved, day after day—to pause finally beneath the field upon which Earth's stupendous armada lay.



SOME stories are forgotten almost as soon as they are printed. Others stand the test of time.

Because "Robot Nemesis," by Dr. Edward E. Smith, has stood this test, it has been nominated for SCIENTIFIKTION'S HALL OF FAME and is reprinted here.

In each issue we will honor one of the most outstanding fantasy classics of all time as selected by our readers.

We hope in this way to bring a new permanence to the science fiction gems of yesterday and to perform a real service to the science fiction devotees of today and tomorrow.

Nominate your own favorites! Send a letter or postcard to The Editor, STARTLING STORIES, 10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. All suggestions are more than welcome!

The truck of Thinkers moved to the fore and its occupants surveyed briefly the terrain so far above them. Then, while the ten leaders continued working as one machine, the Doers waited. Waited while the immense Terrestrial Fleet was provisioned and manned—waited while it went through its seemingly interminable series of preliminary maneuvers—waited with the calmly placid immobility, the utterly inhuman patience of the machine.

Finally the last inspection of the gigantic space-fleet was made. The massive airlock doors were sealed. The field, tortured and scarred by the raving blasts of energy that had so many times hurled upward the stupendous masses of those towering superdreadnaughts of the void, was deserted. All was in readiness for the final take-off. Then, deep underground, from the hundreds of telescopelike projectors studding the domed mechanism of the automatons, there reached invisible but potent beams of force.

Through ore, rock and soil they sped—straight to the bodies of all the men aboard one selected vessel of the Terrestrials. As each group of beams struck its mark one of the crew stiffened momentarily, then settled back, apparently unchanged and unharmed. But the victim was changed and harmed and in an awful and hideous fashion.

Every motor and sensory nerve trunk

had been severed and tapped by the beams of the thinkers. Each crew member's organs of sense now transmitted impulses, not to his own brain but to the mechanical brain of a Thinker. It was the Thinker's brain, not his own, that now sent out the stimuli which activated his every voluntary muscle.

Soon a pit yawned beneath the doomed ship's bulging side. Her sealed airlocks opened and four hundred and ten automatons, with their controllers and other mechanisms, entered her and concealed themselves in various pre-selected rooms.

And thus the *Dresden* took off with her sister-ships—ostensibly and even to television inspection a unit of the Fleet—actually that Fleet's bitterest and most implacable foe. And in a doubly ray-proofed compartment the ten Thinkers continued their work without rest or intermission upon a mechanism even more astoundingly complex than any theretofore attempted by their soulless and ultrascientific clan.

CHAPTER II

Hater of Metal Men

FERDINAND STONE, physicist extraordinary, hated the robot men of metal scientifically and, if such an emotion can be so described, dispassionately. Twenty years before this story opens—in 2991, to be exact—he had realized that the automatons were beyond control and that in the inevitable struggle for supremacy, man, weak as he then was and unprepared, would surely lose.

Therefore, knowing that knowledge is power, he had set himself to the task of learning everything there was to know about the enemy of mankind. He schooled himself to think as the automatons thought—emotionlessly, coldly precisely. He lived as did they with ascetic rigor. To all intents and purposes he became one of them.

Eventually he found the band of fre-

quencies upon which they communicated. He was perhaps the only human being ever to master their mathematico-symbolic language. But he confided in no one. He could trust no human brain except his own to resist the prying forces of the machines.

He drifted from job to position to situation and back to job, because he had very little interest in whatever it was that he was supposed to be doing at the time. His real attention was always fixed upon the affairs of the creatures of metal.

Stone had attained no heights at all in his chosen profession because not even the smallest of his discoveries had been published. In fact, they were not even set down upon paper but existed only in the abnormally intricate convolutions of his mighty brain. Nevertheless his name should go down—*must go down*—in history as one of the greatest of humanity's great.

It was well after midnight when Ferdinand Stone walked unannounced into the private study of Alan Martin, finding the hollow-eyed admiral of the Earth space-fleet still fiercely at work.

"How did you get in here past my guards?" Martin demanded sharply of his scholarly gray-haired visitor.

"Your guards have not been harmed—I have merely caused them to fall asleep," the physicist replied calmly, glancing at a complex instrument upon his wrist. "Since my business with you, while highly important, is not of a nature to be divulged to secretaries, I was compelled to adopt this method of approach.

"You, Admiral Martin, are the most widely known of all the enemies of the automatons. What, if anything, have you done to guard the Fleet against them?"

"Why, nothing—since they have all been destroyed."

"Nonsense! You should know better than that without being told. They merely want you to think that they have all been destroyed."

"What? How do you know that?" Martin shouted. "Did you kill them? Or

do you know who did and how it was done?"

"I did not," the visitor replied, categorically. "I do know who did—a Russian named Narodny. I also know how—by means of sonic and supersonic vibrations. I know that many of them were uninjured because I heard them broadcasting their calls for attention after the damage was all done. Before they made any definite arrangements, however, they switched to tight-beam transmission—a thing I have been afraid of for years—and I have not been able to get a trace of them since."

"Do you mean to tell me that you understand their language—something no man has ever been able even to find?" demanded Martin.

"I do," Stone declared. "Since I know, however, that you would think me a liar, a crank or a plain lunatic. I have come prepared to offer other proofs than my unsupported word. First you already know that many of them escaped the atmospheric waves because a few were killed when their reproduction shops were razed. And you certainly should realize that most of those escaping Narodny's broadcasts were far too clever to be caught by any human mob.

"Secondly I can prove to you mathematically that more of them must have escaped from any possible vibrator than have been accounted for. In this connection I can tell you that if Narodny's method of extermination could have been made efficient I would have wiped them out myself years ago.

"But I believed then and it has since been proved that the survivors of such an attack, while comparatively few in number, would be far more dangerous to humanity than were all their former hordes.

"Thirdly, I have here a list of three hundred seventeen airships—all of which were stolen during the week following the destruction of the automations' factories. Not one of these ships has as yet been found in whole or in part. If I am either insane or mistaken, who stole them—and for what purpose?"

"Three hundred seventeen—in a week? Why was no attention paid to such a thing? I never heard of it."

"Because they were stolen singly and all over the world. Expecting some such move, I looked for these items and tabulated them."

"Then—good Lord! They may be listening to us, right now!"

"Don't worry about that," Stone spoke calmly. "This instrument upon my wrist is not a watch but the generator of a spherical screen through which no robot beam or ray can operate without my knowledge. Certain of its rays also caused your guards to fall asleep."

"I believe you," Martin almost groaned. "If only half of what you say is really true I cannot say how sorry I am that you had to force your way in to me nor how glad I am that you did so. Go ahead I am listening."

STONE talked without interruption for half an hour, concluding, "You understand now why I can no longer play a lone hand. Even though I cannot find them with my limited apparatus I know that they are hiding somewhere, waiting and preparing. They dare not make any overt move while this enormously powerful Fleet is here—nor in the time that it is expected to be gone can they hope to construct works heavy enough to cope with it.

"Therefore they must be so arranging matters that the Fleet shall not return. Since the Fleet is threatened I must accompany it and you must give me a laboratory aboard the flagship. I know that the vessels are all identical but I must be aboard the same ship you are since you alone are to know what I am doing."

"But what could they do?" protested Martin. "And if they should do anything what could you do about it?"

"I don't know," the physicist admitted. Gone now was the calm certainty with which he had been speaking. "That is our weakest point. I have studied that problem from every possible viewpoint and I do not know of anything they can do that promises them success. But you

must remember that no human being really understands a robot's mind.

"We have never even studied one of their brains, you know, as they disintegrate upon the instant of cessation of normal functioning. But just as surely as you and I are sitting here, Admiral Martin, they will do something—something very efficient and exceedingly deadly. I have no idea what it will be. It may be mental or physical or both. They may be hidden away in some of our own ships already."

Martin scoffed. "*Impossible!*" he exclaimed. "Why, those ships have been inspected to the very skin time and time again!"

"Nevertheless they may be there," Stone went on, unmoved. "I am definitely certain of only one thing—if you install a laboratory aboard the flagship for me and equip it exactly according to my instructions you will have one man at least whom nothing that the robots can do will take by surprise. Will you do it?"

"I am convinced, really almost against my will," Martin frowned in thought. "However, convincing anyone else may prove difficult, especially as you insist upon secrecy."

"Don't try to convince anybody!" exclaimed the scientist. "Tell them that I'm building a communicator. Tell them I'm an inventor working on a new ray-projector. Tell them anything except the truth!"

"All right. I have sufficient authority to see that your requests are granted, I think."

Thus it came about that when the immense Terrestrial Contingent lifted itself into the air, Ferdinand Stone was in his private laboratory in the flagship, surrounded by apparatus and equipment of his own designing, much of which was connected to special generators by leads heavy enough to carry their full output.

With Earth some thirty hours beneath them Stone felt himself become weightless. His ready suspicions blazed. He pressed Martin's combination upon his visiphone panel.

"What's the matter?" he rasped. "What're they down for?"

"It's nothing serious," the admiral assured him. "They're just waiting for additional instructions about our course in the maneuvers."

"Not serious, huh?" Stone grunted. "I'm not so sure of that. I want to talk to you and this room's the only place I know where we'll be safe. Can you come down here right away?"

"Why, certainly," Martin assented.

"I never paid any attention to our course," the physicist snapped as his visitor entered the laboratory. "What was it?"

"Take-off exactly at midnight of June nineteenth," Martin recited, watching Stone draw a diagram upon a scratch-pad. "Rise vertically at one and one-half gravities until a velocity of one kilometer per second has been attained, then continue vertical rise at constant velocity."

"At six o'clock three twenty-nine a.m. of June twenty-first head directly for the star Regulus at an acceleration of exactly nine hundred eighty centimeters per second. Hold this course for one hour forty-two minutes, thirty-five seconds, then drift. Further directions will be supplied as soon thereafter as the courses of the other fleets can be checked."

"Has anybody computed it?"

"Undoubtedly the navigators have. Why? That is the course Dos-Tev gave us and it must be followed since he is Admiral-in-Chief of our side, the Blues. One slip may ruin the whole plan, give the Reds, our supposed enemy in these maneuvers, a victory and get us all disgraced."

"Regardless, we'd better check on our course," Stone growled, unimpressed. "We'll compute it roughly right here and see where following these directions has put us." Taking up a slide-rule and a book of logarithms he set to work.

"That initial rise doesn't mean a thing," he commented after awhile, "except to get us far enough away from Earth so that the gravity is small and to conceal from the casual observer that

the effective take-off is still exactly at midnight."

Stone busied himself with calculations for many minutes. He stroked his forehead and scowled. "My figures are very rough, of course," he said at last, "but they show that we've got no more tangential velocity with respect to the sun than a hen has teeth. You can't tell me that it wasn't planned that way purposely—and not by Dos-Tev, either."

"On the other hand our radial velocity directly toward the sun, which is the only velocity we have, amounted to something over fifty-two kilometers per second when we shut off power and is increasing geometrically under the gravitational pull of the sun."

"That course smells to heaven, Martin! Dos-Tev never sent out any such a mess as that. The robots crossed him up! We're heading into the sun—and destruction!"

Without reply Martin called the navigating room. "What do you think of this course, Henderson?" he asked.

"I do not like it, sir," the officer replied. "Relative to the sun we have a tangential velocity of only one-point-three centimeters per second while our radial velocity toward it is very nearly fifty-three-thousand meters per second. We will not be in any real danger for several days but it should be borne in mind that we have no tangential velocity."

"You see, Stone, we are in no present danger," Martin pointed out, "and I am sure that Dos-Tev will send us additional instructions long before our situation becomes acute."

"I'm not," the pessimistic scientist grunted. "Anyway I would advise calling some of the other Blue fleets on your scrambled wave for a checkup."

"There would be no harm in that." Martin called the Communications Officer and soon—

"Communications Officers of all the Blue fleets of the Inner Planets, attention!" The message was hurled out into space by the full power of the flagship's mighty transmitter. "Flagship *Washington* of the Terrestrial Contingent

calling all Blue flagships. We have reason to suspect that the course which has been given us is false. We advise you to check your courses with care and to return to your bases if you disc—"

CHAPTER III

Battle in Space

IN the middle of the word the radio man's clear, precisely spaced enunciation became a hideous drooling, a slobbering meaningless mumble. Martin stared into his plate in amazement. The Communications Officer of Martin's ship, the *Washington*, had slumped down loosely into his seat as though his every bone had turned to a rubber string. His tongue lolled out limply between slack jaws, his eyes protruded, his limbs jerked and twitched aimlessly.

Every man visible in the plate was similarly affected—the entire Communications staff was in the same pitiable condition of utter helplessness. But Ferdinand Stone did not stare. A haze of livid light had appeared, gnawing viciously at his spherical protective screen, and he sprang instantly to his instruments.

"I can't say that I expected this particular development but I know what they are doing and I am not surprised," Stone said coolly. "They have discovered the thought band and are broadcasting such an interference on it that no human being not protected against it can think intelligently."

"There, I have expanded our zone to cover the whole ship. I hope that they don't find out for a few minutes that we are immune and I don't think they can, as I have so adjusted the screen that it is now absorbing instead of radiating."

"Tell the captain to put the ship into heaviest possible battle order with everything full on as soon as the men can handle themselves. Then I want to make a few suggestions."

"What happened anyway?" the Communications Officer, semi-conscious now, was demanding. Something hit me and tore my brain all apart. I couldn't think, couldn't do a thing. My mind was all chewed up by curly pinwheels—"

Throughout the vast battleship of space men raved briefly in delirium. But, the cause removed, recovery was rapid and complete. Martin explained matters to the captain, that worthy issued orders and soon the flagship had in readiness all her weapons, both of defense and of offense.

"Doctor Stone, who knows more about the automatons than does any other human being, will tell us what to do next," the Flight Director said.

"The first thing to do is to locate them," Stone, now temporary commander, stated crisply. "They have taken over at least one of our vessels, probably one close to us so as to be near the center of the formation. Radio room, put out tracers on wave point oh-oh-two-seven-one." He went on to give exact and highly technical instructions as to the tuning of the detectors.

"We have found them, sir," soon came the welcome report. "One ship, the *Dresden*, coordinates forty-two—seventy-nine—sixty-three."

"That makes it bad—very bad," Stone reflected audibly. "We can't expand the zone to release another without enveloping the *Dresden* and exposing ourselves. Can't surprise them—they're ready for anything. It's rather long range, too."

The vessels of the Fleet were a thousand miles apart, being in open order for high-velocity flight in open space. "Torpedoes would be thrown off by her meteorite deflectors. Only one thing to do, Captain—close and tear into her with everything you got."

"But the men in her!" protested Martin.

"Dead long ago," snapped the expert. "Probably been animated corpses for a day. Take a look if you want to—won't do any harm now. Radio, put us on as many of the *Dresden's* television plates as you can—what's the crew of one

ship compared to the hundreds of thousands of men in the rest of the Fleet? We can't burn her out at one blast, anyway.

"They've got real brains and the same armament we have and will certainly kill the crew at the first blast if they haven't done so already. Afraid it'll be a near thing, getting away from the sun, even with eleven other ships to help us—"

He broke off as the beam operators succeeded in making connection briefly with the plates of the *Dresden*. One glimpse, then the visibeam was cut savagely—but that glimpse was enough. They saw that their sister-ship was manned completely by automatons.

In her every compartment men, all too plainly dead, lay wherever they had chanced to fall. The captain swore a startled oath, then bellowed orders. And the flagship, driving projectors fiercely aflame, rushed to come to grips with the *Dresden*.

"You intimated something about help?" Martin suggested. "Can you release some of the other ships from the automaton's yoke?"

"Got to—or roast. This is bound to be a battle of attrition. We can't crush her screens alone until her power is exhausted and we'll be in the sun long before then. I see only one possible way out. We'll have to build a neutralizing generator for every lifeboat this ship carries and send each one out to release one other ship in our Fleet from the robot's grip.

"Eleven boats—that'll make twelve to concentrate on her—about all that could attack at once, anyway. That way will take so much time that it will certainly be touch-and-go but it's the only thing we can do as far as I can see. Give me ten good radiomen and some mechanics and we'll get at it."

While the technicians were coming on the run Stone issued final instructions. "Attack with every weapon you can possibly use. Try to break down the *Dresden's* meteorite shields, so that you can use our shells and torpedoes. Burn every gram of fuel that your generators

will take. Don't try to save it. The more you burn the more they'll have to and the quicker we can take 'em. We can refuel you easily enough from the other vessels if we get away."

THEN, while Stone and his technical experts labored upon the generators of the screens which were to protect eleven more of the gigantic vessels against the thought-destroying radiations of the automatons—while the computers calculated minute by minute the exact progress of the Fleet toward the blazing sun—the flagship *Washington* drove in upon the rebellious *Dresden*, her main forward battery furiously aflame. Drove in until the repeller-screens of the two vessels locked and buckled. Then Captain Malcolm really opened up.

That grizzled four-striper had been at a loss—knowing little indeed of the oscillatory nature of thought and still less of the abstruse mathematics in which Ferdinand Stone took such delight—but here was something that he understood thoroughly.

He knew his ship, knew her every weapon and her every whim, knew to the final volt and to the ultimate ampere her Gargantuan capacity both to give it and to take it. He could fight his ship—and how he fought her!

From every projector that could be brought to bear there flamed out against the *Dresden* beams of energy and potency indescribable, at whose scintillant areas of contact the defensive screens of the robot-manned cruiser flared into terrible resplendent brilliance. Every type of lethal vibratory force was hurled upon every usable destructive frequency.

Needle-rays and stabbing penetrant stilettos of fire thrust and thrust again. Sizzling flashing planes cut and slashed. The heaviest annihilating and disintegrating beams generable by man clawed and tore in wild abandon.

And over all and through all the stupendously powerful blanketing beams—so furiously driven that the coils and commutators of their generators fairly

smoked and that the refractory throats of their projectors glared radiantly violet and began slowly, stubbornly to volatilize—raced out in all their pyrotechnically incandescent might, striving prodigiously to crush by their sheer power the shielding screens of the vessel of the automatons.

Nor was the vibratory offensive alone. Every gun, primary or auxiliary, that could be pointed at the *Dresden* was vomiting smoke—and flame—enshrouded steel as fast as automatic loaders could serve it, and under that continuous, appallingly silent concussion the giant frame of the flagship shuddered and trembled in every plate and member.

And from every launching-tube there were streaming the deadliest missiles known to science—radio-dirigible torpedoes which, looping in vast circles to attain the highest possible measure of momentum, crashed against the *Dresden's* meteorite deflectors in Herculean efforts to break them down—and, in failing to do so, exploded and filled all space with raging flame and with flying fragments of metal.

Captain Malcolm was burning his stores of fuel and munitions at an appalling rate careless alike of exhaustion of reserves and of service-life of equipment. All his generators were running at a shockingly ruinous overload, his every projector was being used so mercilessly that not even their powerful refrigerators, radiating the transported heat into the interplanetary cold from the dark side of the ship, could keep their refractory linings in place for long.

And through raging beam, through blazing ray, through crushing force, through storm of explosive and through rain of metal, the *Dresden* remained apparently unscathed. Her screens were radiating high into the violet but they showed no signs of weakening or of going down.

Nor did the meteorite deflectors break down. Everything held. Since she was armed as capably as was the flagship and was being fought by inhumanly intelligent monstrosities, she was invulnerable to any one ship of the Fleet as

long as her generators could be fed.

Nevertheless Captain Malcolm was well content. He was making the *Dresden* burn plenty of irreplaceable fuel and his generators and projectors would last long enough. His ship, his men and his weapons could and would carry the load until the fresh attackers should take it over. And carry it they did—carried it while Stone and his overdriven crew finished their complicated mechanisms and flew out into space toward the eleven nearest battleships of the Fleet.

They carried it while the computers, grim-faced and scowling now, jotted down from minute to minute the enormous and rapidly-increasing figure representing their radial velocity. They carried it while Earth's immense armada, manned by creatures incapable of even the simplest coherent thought or purposeful notion, plunged sickishly downward in its madly hopeless fall, with scarcely a measurable trace of tangential velocity, toward the unimaginable inferno of the sun.

Eventually, however, the shielded life-boats approached their objectives and expanded their screens to enclose them. Officers recovered, airlocks opened and the life-boats, still radiating protection, were taken inside. Explanations were made, orders were given and one by one the eleven vengeful superdreadnoughts shot away to join their flagship in abating the menace of the machine.

No conceivable structure, however armed or powered, could long withstand the fury of the combined assault of twelve such superb battlecraft. Under the awful concentration of force the screens of the doomed ship radiated higher and higher into the ultra-violet, went black, failed. With those mighty defenses down the end was practically instantaneous.

No unprotected metal can endure even momentarily the ardor of such beams and they played on, not only until every plate and girder of the vessel and every nut, bolt and rivet of its monstrous crew had been liquefied but had been completely volatilized.

At the instant of cessation of the

brain-scrambling activities of the automats the Communications Officer had begun an insistent broadcast. Aboard all of the ships there were many who did not recover—who would be helpless imbeciles during the short period of life left to them—but soon an intelligent officer was at every control and each unit of the Terrestrial Contingent was exerting its maximum thrust at a right angle to its line of fall.

And now the burden was shifted from the fighting staff to the no less able engineers and computers. To the engineers the task of keeping their mighty engines in such tune as to maintain constantly the peak acceleration of three Earth gravities—to the computers that of so directing their ever-changing course as to win every possible centimeter of precious tangential velocity.

CHAPTER IV

The Sun's Gravity

FERDINAND STONE was hollow-eyed and gaunt from his practically sleepless days and nights of toil. But he was as grimly resolute as ever. Struggling against the terrific weight of three gravities he made his way to the desk of the Chief Computer and waited while that worthy, whose leaden hands could scarcely manipulate the instruments of his profession, finished his seemingly endless calculations.

"We shall escape the sun's mighty attraction, Doctor Stone, with approximately half a gravity to spare," the mathematician reported finally. "Whether we shall be alive or not is another question. There will be heat, which our armor may or may not be able to handle. There will be radiations, which our armor may or may not be able to stop. You, of course, know a lot more about those things than I do."

"Distance at closest approach?" snapped Stone.

"Two point twenty-nine times ten to

the ninth meters from the sun's center," the computer shot back instantly. "That is, one million five hundred ninety thousand kilometers—only two point twenty-seven radii—from the arbitrary surface. What do you think of our chances, sir?"

"It will probably be a near thing—very near," the physicist replied thoughtfully. "Much, however, can be done. We can probably tune our defensive screens to block most of the harmful radiations and we may be able to muster other defenses. I shall analyze the radiations and see what we can do about neutralizing them."

"You will go to bed," directed Martin, crisply. "There will be lots of time for that work after you get rested up. The doctors have been reporting that the men who did not recover from the robot's broadcast are dying under this acceleration. With those facts staring us in the face, however, I do not see how we can reduce our power."

"We can't. As it is many more of us will probably die before we get away from the Sun," and Stone staggered away, practically asleep on his feet.

Day after day the frightful fall continued. The sun grew larger and larger, more and ever more menacingly intense. One by one at first, then by scores, the mindless men of the Fleet died and were consigned to space—a man must be in full control of all his faculties to survive for long an acceleration of these gravities.

The generators of the defensive screens had early been tuned to neutralize as much as possible of Old Sol's most fervently harmful frequencies and but for their mighty shields every man of the fleet would have perished long since. Now even those ultra-powerful guards were proving inadequate.

Refrigerators were running at the highest possible overload and the men, pressing as closely as possible to the dark sides of their vessels, were availing themselves of such extra protection of lead shields and the like as could be improvised from whatever material was at hand.

Yet the already stifling air became

hotter and hotter, eyes began to ache and burn, skins blistered and cracked under the punishing impact of forces which all defenses could not block. But at last came the long awaited announcement.

"Pilots and watch-officers of all ships, attention!" the Chief Computer spoke into his microphone through parched and blackened lips. "We are now at the point of tangency. The gravity of the sun here is twenty-four point five meters per second squared.

"Since we are blasting twenty-nine point four we are beginning to pull away at an acceleration of four point nine. Until further notice keep your pointers directly away from the sun's center in the plane of the ecliptic."

The sun was now in no sense the orb of day with which we upon Earth's green surface are familiar. It was a gigantic globe of turbulently seething flame, subtending an angle of almost thirty-five degrees, blotting out a full fourth of the cone of normally distinct vision.

Sunspots were plainly to be seen—combinations of indescribably violent cyclonic storms and volcanic eruptions in a gaseously liquid medium of searing eye-tearing incandescence. And everywhere, threatening at times even to reach the fiercely-struggling ships of space, were the solar prominences—fiendish javelins of frantic destruction, hurling themselves in wild abandon out into the empty reaches of the void.

EYES behind almost opaque lead glass goggles, head and body encased in a multi-layered suit each ply of which was copiously smeared with thick lead paint, Stone studied the raging monster of the heavens from the closest viewpoint any human being had ever attained and lived.

Even he, protected as he was, could peer but briefly. Master physicist though he was and astronomer-of-sorts, he was profoundly awed at the spectacle.

Twice that terrifying mass was circled. Then, air-temperature again bearable and lethal radiations stopped, the

grueling acceleration was reduced to a heavenly one-and-one half gravities and the vast fleet remade its formation.

The automatons and the sun between them had taken heavy toll. But the gaps were filled, men were transferred to equalize the losses of personnel and the course was laid for distant Earth. And in the Admiral's private quarters two men sat together and stared at each other.

"Well, that's that—so far, so good." The physicist broke the long silence.

"But is their power really broken?" asked Martin, anxiously.

"I don't know," Stone grunted, dourly. "But the pick of them—the brainiest of the lot—were undoubtedly here. We beat them."

Martin interrupted. "You beat them, you mean," he said.

"With a lot of absolutely indispensable help from you and your force. But have it your own way—what do words matter? I beat them then. And in the same sense I can beat the rest of them if we plays our cards exactly right."

"In what way?"

"By keeping me entirely out of the

picture. Believe me, Martin, it is of the essence that all of your officers who know what happened be sworn to silence, that not a word about me leak out to anybody. Put out any story you please except the truth—mention the name of anybody or anything between here and Andromeda except me. Promise me now that you will not let my name get out until I give you permission or until after I am dead."

"But I'll have to in my reports."

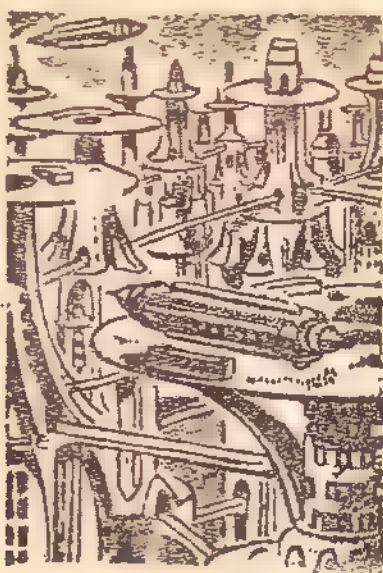
"You report only to the Supreme Council and a good half of those reports are sealed. Seal this one."

"But I think—"

"What with?" gruffly. "If my name becomes known my usefulness—and my life—are done. Remember, Martin, I know robots. There are some capable ones left and if they get wind of me in any way they'll get me before I can get them. As things are and with your help I can and I will get them all. That's a promise. Have I yours?"

"In that case, of course you have."

And Admiral Alan Martin and Doctor Ferdinand Stone were men who kept their promises.



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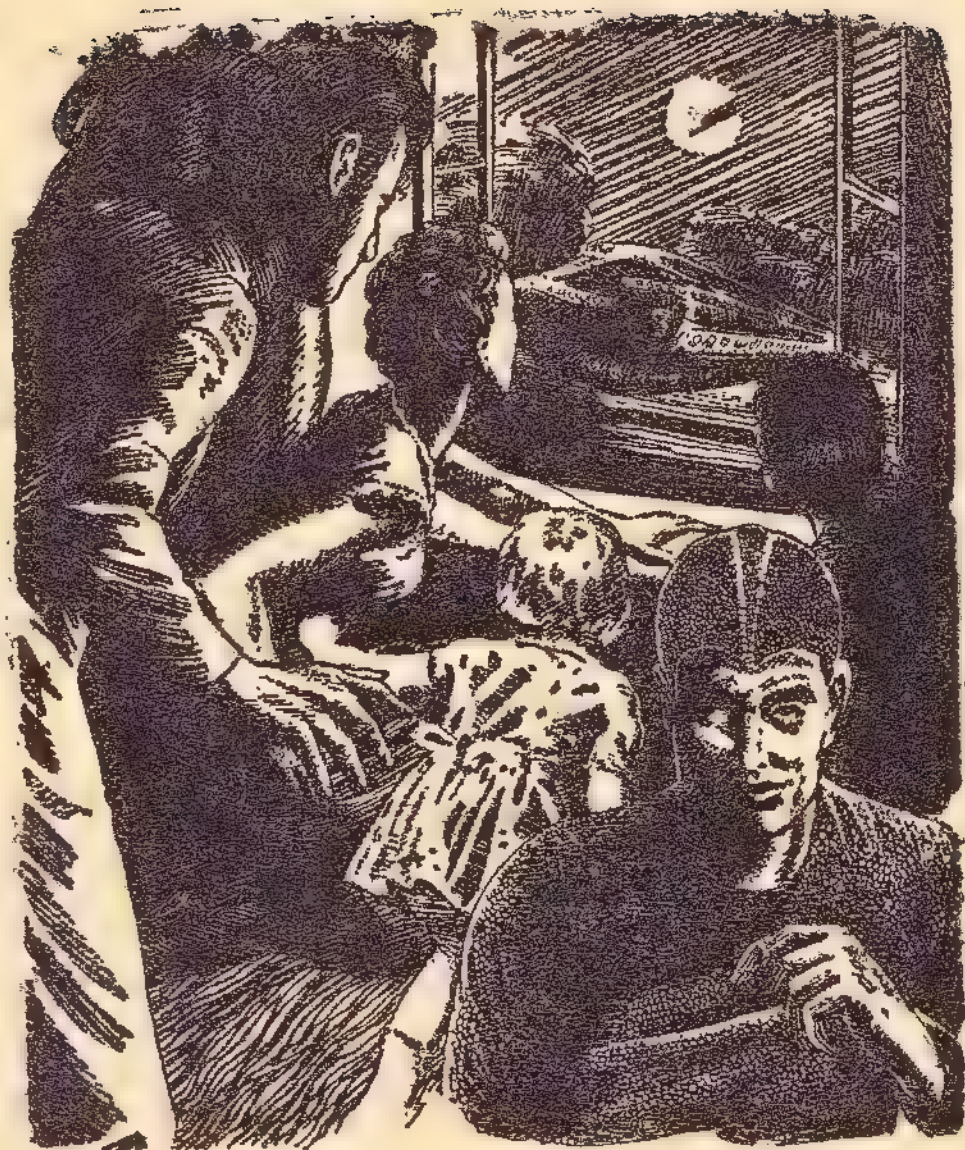
FRANK BELKNAP LONG

Man expected the Martians

to come as destroyers, so

when they came as friends,

it plainly seemed a trick!



With exclamations of disbelief
the children rushed to the window

IT wasn't at all the way they had imagined it would be. On the radio the news had sounded so horribly ominous, like the opening and closing chords of a funeral march with dull explosions interrupting the music.

Earth invaded from Mars or Venus, shining lights in the sky, the slow remorseless approach of the conquerors, their terrible weapons sending great shafts of electric radiance boring through the night.

The television screen in the living room had gone dead on the frozen face of a marionette. For an instant the radio in the children's nursery upstairs had squealed and hummed with static while the voice of an announcer pierced the bedlam like the last lingering wail of a banshee at Finnegan's wake.

"We're taking you to Washington! The next voice you hear will be that of the President—"

Brindled Betty, the tabbycat, sat staring now at a bough-shadowed window-pane, her back hairs bristling in fright. But the tapping on the door downstairs was so quiet and gentle it did not even

frighten the children as it went echoing through the house.

It has been said that the splash of a stone dropped into a bottomless well can be heard by those with dread in their hearts and the will to listen. The tapping was as light as the patter of rain on a gossamer web in a summer garden. And yet it could be heard in every part of the house, upstairs and down, from cellar to attic.

"Let us in!" it seemed to be saying. "We're from Mars and we've come to stay. You may as well make the best of what has happened!"

Monica Dayton looked at her husband and then down at the tousled head of her small son. She groped for words.

"Dan, it can't be true! Only the very ignorant were taken in by that Martian invasion scare of ten or twelve years ago. We've got to remember that! Only the *very* ignorant!"

Dan Dayton was far too disturbed to contradict his wife. In his mind's gaze he saw a cone of cold blue radiance sweeping straight toward him across the floor. Blotting out the children first

and then the mother of his children!

Blotting out Tommy, eight-next-month, and Kathy, six-last-week, with a horrible droning and a humming, unearthly as an echo in a vacuum, chill with the deadliness of the completely alien. Dan Dayton did not even consider what might happen to himself.

He never had considered himself first in the ordinary affairs of life and he wasn't starting now. He walked to the front door and threw it open.

"May I come in?" the youth asked in a pleasant friendly voice.

THE youth was very tall, well over six feet, and quite resplendently attired in a single shining garment which seemed molded to his body, giving him the aspect of an acrobat in tights. He stood facing Dayton with the moonlight at his back, his shoulders held straight. It was easy to see that he was smiling, though his face was half in shadows. Everything about him seemed to radiate confidence and good will.

"May I come in?" he repeated.

Dayton was too startled to say anything. He simply fell back and the stranger moved past him into the living room.

The stranger looked first at the children and then at Dan Dayton's wife. "How are you, children?" he said, smiling. "How are you, Monica?"

Dayton returned into the room and stood staring from the youth to his wife, utter consternation in his eyes. Monica's lips began to shake. It was a full minute before she could find enough self-confidence to say, "Who are you? Where did you come from?"

"I came from Mars!" the young man said.

"He's crazy, Mom!" Tommy cried, drawing close to his mother in sudden fright.

"You speak English!" Monica's eyes were suddenly wild with relief. "You know my name! If you were really from Mars you'd never call it Mars! Mars is what *we* call it! You'd have another name for it."

"We have," the youth said. "But be-

fore I knocked your minds were pleasant with a drowsy hum of thoughts. Your thoughts were like golden bees, swarming unbidden into my mind. It was a simple matter for me to make your thoughts yield the rich honey of understanding!"

"Telepathy!" Monica flashed him a scornful look. "You can read our minds—is that what you're trying to say?"

The youth nodded.

"Well, it won't wash!" Monica exclaimed. "If you can read my thoughts what am I thinking now? Tell me! We'll put it to the test, do you hear?"

For answer the youth walked to the window and drew back the drapes. "The space-ship which brought me to Earth is out there," he said. "You were thinking that if I could show you the ship you would believe me."

With exclamations of wild disbelief the children rushed to the window. The youth stepped aside so that both the children and Monica could peer out.

"Golly!" Tommy muttered.

"Get back, let me look!" Kathy pleaded.

Dan Dayton stepped forward and raised his daughter up, a choking dryness in his throat.

The ship was at least a hundred feet in length and it rested on the front lawn in a blaze of light. It tapered at both ends like a great silver cigar.

The youth looked around the room. A look of gratification came into his face when his eyes lighted on a comfortable easy chair. He strode to the chair and sat down, crossing his long legs.

"There is so much that you do not know!" he said. "So many ways in which I can be of help."

Outside the windows the night lay dreaming in quiet moonlight. A June bug buzzed into the room and circled the stranger's head twice before it went zooming out into the night again.

Tommy was the first to accept the space-ship on the lawn and the stranger in the chair—to really accept what had happened with his emotions as well as his mind.

"What's Mars like?" he asked. "Do

you have really big cities like New York or Chicago?"

"Of course we have!" the youth said. "But there is no dust in our cities. A Martian city is like a great silver urn, blue and cool within. It is like a flower opening snowy petals to the dawn."

"Do Martians have fun playing games?" Tommy asked. "I mean—baseball and things like that?"

"Not baseball, Tommy!" the youth said. "Martians go skating. On Earth there are insects which skate over the water in deep woodland pools. Martians skate over frozen blue lakes in much the same way. It gives them a great deal of pleasure."

"Do they do all of the other things we do?" Kathy asked. "Eat and sleep and go for walks and have children?"

"Pretty nearly!" the youth said. "But they are the worst walkers in the world. It is so much easier to fly that they have almost forgotten how to walk."

"You walk all right!" Tommy said.

"There is a reason for that, Tommy!" the youth said.

MONICA did an incredible thing then. She approached the seated youth and bent over him. Without trying to analyze her emotions, feeling only a fierce concern for the welfare of her children, she looked deep into his eyes.

If the stranger were evil surely her mother's instinct would know. Surely, surely, she would be warned in time.

When Monica straightened there was a great wonder in her gaze. "He is speaking the truth!" she said. "He wishes only to help us and asks nothing in return."

"I could have told you that!" the youth said, with a quick, forgiving smile.

The doorbell rang suddenly, echoing through the house. Dan exchanged a startled glance with his wife—then went quickly to answer the bell.

A stout, gray-haired man of fifty stood on the porch, a heavy rifle in the crook of his arm. Dan recognized him instantly as the mayor of the town, William Bowers.

"We saw the ship come down on your lawn!" Bowers said, excitedly. "I am

acting under direct orders from the Governor! In each village the local authorities have been empowered to take action and preserve order!"

As if bursting with a desire to exercise his authority Mayor Bowers brushed quickly past Dayton and entered the living room. He looked around. His eye fell on the youth and he stiffened in horrified alarm.

"Just who is this?" he demanded.

"A Martian!" Monica said. "He came to Earth in the space-ship on the lawn!"

Bowers' face grew hard and determined. He went up to the youth and thrust the barrel of the rifle up against the youth's chest.

"Get up and keep your hands raised!" he warned. "I'm not taking any chances!"

"Don't be a fool, Bowers!" Dan Dayton said. "Put that gun up and listen to what he has to say!"

"I'll do nothing of the sort!" Bowers retorted. "There's something ugly here, something I don't understand. I'm playing it sure!"

The youth spoke then. "You're taking me to jail?"

"That's right!" Bowers glared. "I'm locking you up. I won't breathe easy until you're behind bars."

"I'm afraid that I cannot go with you," the youth said.

"You'd better get some sense into that thick skull of yours!" Bowers warned. "You're human—you're a man. That means you can be hurt, knocked down, thrown into prison. I'll give you just ten more seconds to get moving."

"But why should you want to hurt me?" the youth asked. "Have I hurt you?"

"You came to invade Earth!" the Mayor cried, almost beside himself with rage. "You came to make war! You came to kill and maim and destroy!"

Bowers' face turned savage. "Maybe I'm crazy to act as if you really could be from Mars! But I'd rather be crazy than dead."

"I am really from Mars," the youth said. "But you are putting words into my mouth. Why should I come to kill

and maim? Am I not a man like yourself? Surely we have much in common. Surely only a wild beast would repay friendship with destruction."

"*Friendship!* You expect me to believe you came in friendship?"

"How could you believe otherwise?" the youth asked.

"Don't think you can disarm me with your talk!" Bowers cried, his face purpling. "I don't know what kind of trick you're pulling but it won't work! Do you hear? It will get you nowhere!"

"You'd better put up that gun, Bowers!" Dan Dayton said.

Bowers turned savagely, "Who'll make me?"

"I will!" Dan said.

He went up to Bowers and grabbed hold of the gun. The two men started struggling furiously for possession of the weapon. Mayor Bowers punched Dayton in the stomach. Dayton grunted, recoiled a step and sent his fist crashing against Bowers' jaw.

Bowers reeled back, and swung about. He aimed the rifle at the youth's chest, his lips flecked with blood.

"All right now! Get moving!"

"I'm sorry, but I shall stay here with my friends!" the youth said.

"Ah!"

"I'm staying here. You had better go. If you only want to hurt people, Mayor Bowers, we can never be friends!"

Mayor Bowers squeezed the trigger of the rifle. The weapon leapt, roared.

THE stranger fell forward to the floor. His right arm went spinning off. His head fell back, began to rock. His right eye rolled out on the floor. Wheels, cogs and gears spurted from his chest in a metallic shower. There was a great yawning hole in his chest.

Smoke poured from him and was fanned by a breeze from the window blowing in from the cool night.

Mayor Bowers stood blinking stupidly, too appalled to make a sound. But Tommy ran with a shriek to the shattered, crumpled form on the floor.

"You've killed him!" he sobbed, tears streaming down his face. "You've killed

him! You've killed him!"

"A robot!" Dan heard himself muttering, a horrible dryness in his mouth.

Mayor Bowers found his voice then. "I knew it was some kind of vicious trick," he said. "I could tell there was something wrong. Nobody could be as good as he claimed to be. Real people just aren't made that way."

Monica reached out and drew her son to her. Holding him tightly by the shoulder she faced Mayor Bowers in white-lipped rage.

"He *was* good!" she said. "He was friendly and good and kind. I could feel the goodness radiating out from him. Dan could feel it too. The children could feel it. If there is justice on Earth you'll pay for what you just did, Mayor Bowers!"

"Nonsense!" Mayor Bowers said, drawing himself up. "He was just an ingenious mechanical dummy! The spaceship must be a fraud too! I intend to get to the bottom of this!"

Mayor Bowers swung about and walked straight out of the room and out of the cottage, the rifle securely back in the crook of his arm.

The children rushed to the window to watch Mayor Bowers cross the lawn. He was almost to the ship, well within the shadow of the ship, when the even vaster shadow fell upon him.

Mayor Bowers screamed just once but so shrilly that for the barest instant he seemed to be right back in the room again.

Then a dull thundering came from beyond the window. Lights flashed on the lawn, danced, leapt high. Mayor Bowers was lifted up and hurled thirty feet. He crashed down on the gravel driveway in front of the cottage, rolled over and lay still.

After a moment a slight twitching shuddered through him. He sat up, his face dazed, and shook his head as if to clear it. Instantly stark terror seemed to sweep back upon him. He recoiled, blinking furiously, his attitude that of a light-dazzled puppy in a litter of blind squirming whelps.

He was dragging himself away into

the darkness when the voice spoke. The voice seemed to be in the room, and yet to come from a great distance. Perhaps it was not an actual voice.

"This is but one of many cautious experiments which we have been conducting all over Earth to determine the real nature of your intelligence and emotional equipment. We constructed an automaton in the likeness of yourselves, friendly and without guile.

"We constructed him on Mars and sent him to test your good will as you test the acid bite of certain fluids with bits of colored paper. He was like you in that he represented all that you most admire in yourselves.

"He was like you and yet how quickly he was destroyed! No Mayfly living out its brief span in the sunlight was ever so ill-treated by its own kind. We are not like you at all and if we showed ourselves to you as we are—do you not see? If you treat your own kind as you treated him how would you treat another type of life, completely alien to you?"

For a moment a faint, pulsing radi-

ance seemed to fill the room.

"We came in friendliness, bearing a gift well within our power to bestow. But that gift we must now withhold. All Earth will forget. We shall make sure of that. You will remember only that you were vaguely troubled by an interruption in your pleasant ways so trivial it will hardly seem worth trying to recall.

"You will never know that you might have had—immortality under the stars!"

The voice faded as the children stared and Dan Dayton stood with his arm about his wife's shoulder, a shining wonder in his stare.

Upstairs in the nursery the children's radio, no longer silenced by the electrical discharge on the lawn, squealed and hummed with static again.

Then a voice droned out of the din, "And the Silver Queen said to the Jack-in-Ermine, quite earnestly, 'Snow fills the moat and wolves howl on the plain! Tarry here with me by the fire, my brave knight!'"



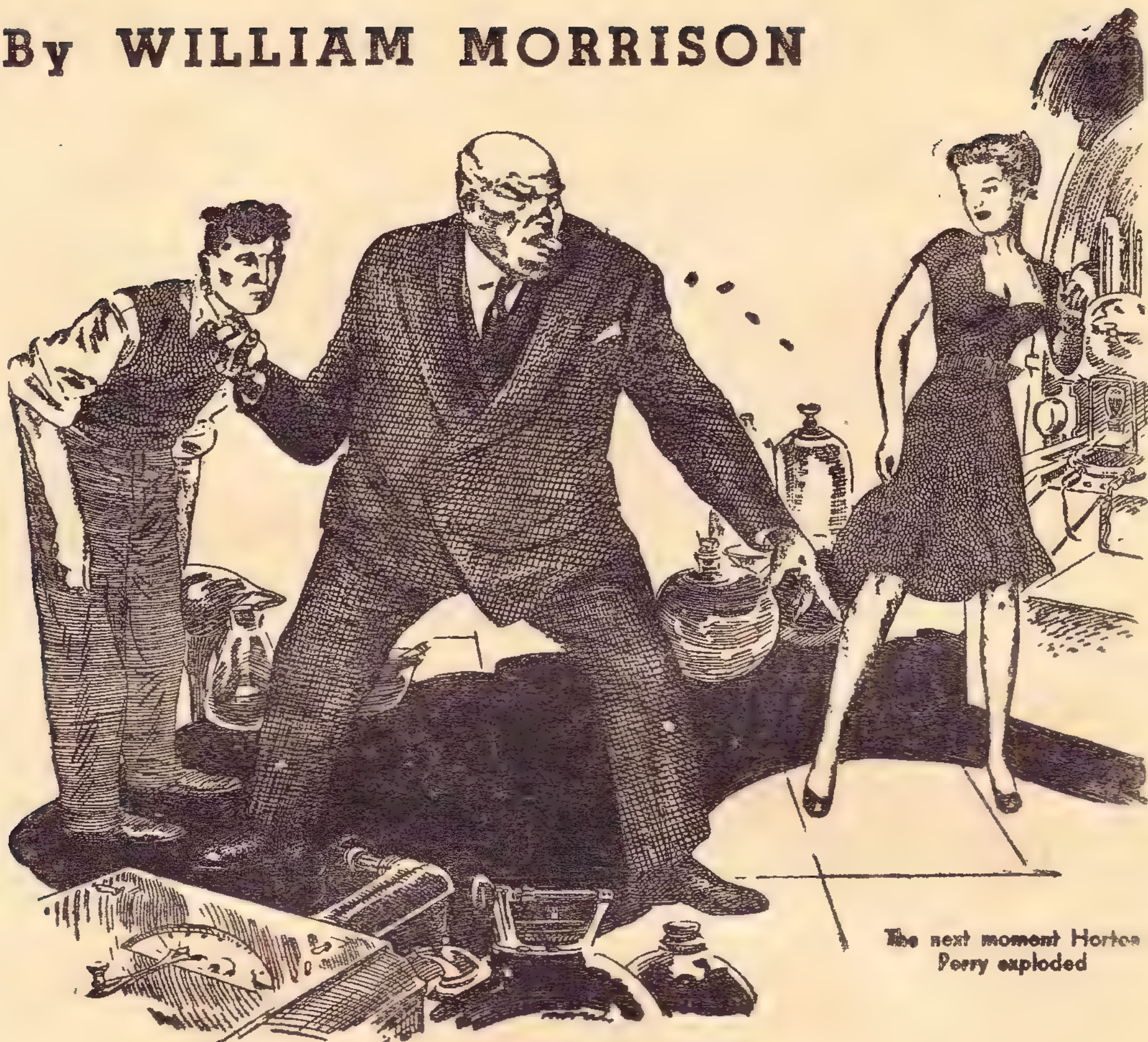
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By WILLIAM MORRISON



Disappointment

THE day was to mark the beginning of the great disappointment of his life, but Horton Perry had no suspicion of that. He knew only that the man who had just been presented to him as the husband-elect of his only daughter, was precisely one of those men he had always despised. Even Stewart Payne's appearance was against

him. He was tall, lanky, and dressed in very imperfectly fitting clothes that seemed to have been slept in. Perry wouldn't have hired him as a nut salesman in fifty years.

Perry himself was of medium height, plump, nattily dressed, and possessed of an air of great friendliness. He smiled easily, even when he prepared to cut

You just can't stop Horton Perry, the salted nut king, from complaining about that ultra-scientific son-in-law of his!

your throat, and he could look you in the eye, even when preparing to stab you in the back.

Payne, however, couldn't perform either of these feats. He never stared at the person to whom he was talking—he always stared through him. The older man noted the strange quality of his gaze, as if Payne's eyes had the faculty of focusing X-ray images on a peculiar retina that no other human being could match.

The eyes were a giveaway. Payne spoke to the man who was about to become his father-in-law. He even listened to him, yet all the time he paid him no genuine attention whatever. The secret recesses of his mind seemed occupied with mysterious problems he shared with no one. It was clear that he was one of those impractical, absent-minded men with no future prospects that any sensible man would have paid a cent for. And Horton Perry, who had salted away in his business more than most people would have guessed, suspected that he was going to be asked to pay much more than a cent. "What are you going to do for money?" Perry demanded.

Payne looked surprised. "Why, Mr. Perry, I have my salary."

"How much is that?"

"Three thousand dollars a year," said Payne proudly. "I'm an assistant professor, you know."

Perry winced, and his second chin shook with emotion. Three thousand wouldn't keep his daughter in peanuts, which were the least expensive nut he sold. But Angela herself, a curly-headed blonde with frivolous features that most people had the habit of associating with an empty head, smiled fondly into Payne's face, her own expression reflecting his pride. "Stewart won't be an assistant for very long, Father."

Angela's head was not at all empty, her will could be iron, and on the whole, Perry had long ago decided that it was more dangerous to argue with her than with his most implacable business enemy. He did what lawyers called stipulating the point. "How much does a full professor get?" he demanded.

"Well, er—" Payne's face had that faraway look again. "I'm not sure."

"Six thousand dollars a year," said the more practical Angela. "That is, after ten years."

HORTON PERRY tried not to grit his teeth. He knew his daughter, and he could see that she was as much determined to make this man his son-in-law as he had been determined to make himself the nut king.

"Look here, Payne," he began, "if you marry Angela, you live on your salary, and not a penny will you receive for housekeeping. However, I have no objection to putting you in the way of making a decent income by your own efforts. Assuming, that is, that you are capable of making a decent income at all."

He seized a bowl of cashews and spoke unexpectedly: "Here, taste these."

Payne took a handful from the top, and chewed as if he were performing an experiment. "Rather flat," he said.

"Angela, you try these pecans."

Angela ate daintily. "Too salty," she answered.

"You're both right," declared Horton Perry. "And right there is my problem. In this day of television, walkie-talkies, and atomic power, it ought to be an easy one. I'll give you five hundred dollars to solve it. I regard the money as practically a gift. All the same, do a good job, and there'll be more such gifts coming."

"I don't understand, Father. What problem did you say?"

"The nut-salting problem. We have found it impossible to salt nuts and have the salt remain properly distributed. Those cashews have been shaken in a box, so that most of the crystals have fallen to the bottom, and the top nuts taste flat. Of course, the salt sticks better on some nuts than on others. Some are more oily, others are dry.

"We find, in many cases, the problem is an annoying one, and I'm anxious to have it solved. I want you, Payne, to devise a method of keeping the salt evenly distributed over every kind of nut, so that a train or truck ride doesn't

shake it down. If you're as good a scientist as Angela thinks you are—"

"Better," interrupted Angela.

"Then the job shouldn't take you more than a week. And five hundred dollars isn't bad for a week's work. Is it a deal?"

Payne didn't answer directly. He was talking absently to himself, and Perry could catch only a few phrases. "Sodium ion," "chloride ion," "adsorption in monomolecular layers," "orientation of unsaturated paraffin chain in triglycerides," and "possibly of utilizing electric dipoles" struck his ear.

It was Angela who spoke up briskly, "It's a deal, Father. Stewart will do the job in a week."

"Good. Bring me your formula for the process, and you can get married."

"Oh, no, Father, we're getting married anyway."

"I refuse to give you my permission until Payne has solved this problem."

"Then we'll get married without it."

Perry glowered at her as she led the still thinking scientist from the room. That gentleman was talking to himself of van der Waals forces and potential barriers as he passed through the doorway. Perry muttered an oath to the empty room. Trust his daughter to pick a nincompoop like that, who would condemn her to live out her days in poverty—and probably enjoy herself in the process.

Then, with the efficiency for which he was famed in the nut business, he put his daughter and her fiance out of his mind, and turned his full attention first to the mysterious spotting of a cargo of worrisome walnuts, and after that to the more congenial problem of how to do "Norton Nuts," his hated rival out of an important order.

IT was two weeks later, on the very eve of his wedding, that Stewart Payne called his father-in-law-to-be. "I think I've solved your problem for you, Mr. Perry," he began modestly.

Perry clutched the phone tighter. "Fine. How did you do it?"

"Well, if we coat the nut with a solution of sodium chloride in a suspension

of a certain chrysanthrene derivative—"

"How much does this stuff cost?"

"Oh, a dollar or two a pound," replied the scientist vaguely. "Or possibly five dollars a pound. It doesn't matter greatly. We wouldn't use much of it."

"How much would it cost to dry the nuts after coating them?"

"A fraction of a cent per pound. Of course, expensive machinery would be required—" Suddenly Payne's voice died away to a mumble.

"What was that?"

"It has just struck me that—yes, I think that would be an objection."

"What has struck you? What's the objection?"

"Merely that some of the fused ring anthracene derivatives are carcinogenic."

"What does that mean in English?"

"That they are cancer-producing."

"You mean that people who ate the nuts you treated would get cancer?"

Payne said absently, and as if he had lost interest, "Yes, there is that possibility." He added, as if to himself, "Perhaps I'd better think of something else."

"Perhaps you'd better," snarled Perry, and slammed the receiver down with a curse. His worst forebodings had been realized.

A month after the honeymoon, Horton Perry visited his son-in-law's laboratory. "So you think that this time you have it?" he asked in surly tones.

"Absolutely, Father," answered Payne respectfully. "This is it."

"We've conducted tests," said Angela proudly. "The materials used are inexpensive and harmless. They coat the nuts evenly. Stewart has measured the amount of sodium chloride—"

Perry snorted. "Since when have you known what sodium chloride means, Angela? Don't put on airs for me."

Angela smiled without resentment. "Stewart has measured the amount of salt abraded in a shaking machine, and found it trifling," she remarked.

"In fact," Payne insisted, "the insignificant quantities removed can be detected only spectroscopically."

Horton Perry took a handful of the cashews offered him, and examined them carefully. They sparkled like tasty diamonds, and none of the salt came off onto his hands. He popped them into his mouth.

The next moment he exploded. It was a question of what shot out of his mouth first, the nuts, a tremendous curse, or two teeth which had been broken out of his plate. Nuts and teeth hit the floor simultaneously with ominous crackles, while the thunder of his voice filled the room.

Angela shrieked in dismay, "Father, what happened?" But Payne, ever the scientist, was wasting no time over his father-in-law's misfortune. He had picked up a couple of nuts, and was examining them with his usual thoughtful air, looking past the surface into the space between the atoms. "Very interesting and unexpected. 'Slow secondary reaction—intensification of surface forces. May have some relation to the case hardening of steel.'"

He placed a cashew on the soapstone laboratory table and pounded it with a hammer. The nut sank into the soapstone and cut the hammer at the same time. Its own surface showed not a scratch. Horton Perry, still cursing, didn't even notice.

A YEAR later, shortly after the birth of his first grandchild, Horton Perry visited the laboratory again. He had heard nothing from his son-in-law that indicated a solution of the nut-salting problem, and in view of the fact that the arrival of his grandson had cost him five thousand dollars, which Angela had extorted from him in addition to the promised five hundred, he was feeling rather bitter.

His son-in-law, outside of having fathered a child, was a conspicuous failure. He had, it was true, published two short scientific papers on the nature of surface forces, but they were written in incomprehensible scientific jargon, and Perry had tossed them aside in disgust. What he wanted was the answer to his problem.

Payne was working in a high-pressure room at the end of the building, and Perry sat down at his son-in-law's desk to wait, his eyes wandering idly over notes which were meaningless to him, while with his right thumb and forefinger he felt the new set of false teeth which had replaced the one damaged by the impenetrable cashews.

At the end of five minutes he was boiling at the idea of having wasted so much of his valuable time. Five minutes more, and he had stood up and was about to stalk out of the room, when a man stopped him.

The man carried a revolver in his hand, and Perry was too excited to notice his height, age, or any of the facial details which might have been useful later to the police. He spoke tersely. "I'll have that formula now, Doctor Payne."

"Put that gun down," said Perry excitedly.

"Don't be a fool, Doc. I can shoot and be out of here before anybody knows what's up. I want that formula."

"Don't call me Doc. That isn't my name. And don't talk nonsense about a formula I've never heard about."

"The one you mention in your articles, Doc. The one that produced those surface changes you wrote about. Hand it over."

"I am trying to tell you that I am not Doctor Payne. And furthermore—"

At this point, Payne entered, his eyes seeming to look through the revolver, the bullets with which it was loaded, and the wall behind it. "I thought I heard someone mention my name."

"So you're Doctor Payne. Okay, you hand over that formula."

"I'm afraid I can't do that," said Payne apologetically. "It wouldn't do to have my methods become general knowledge. Not at this stage. And I think that you'd better let me hold that revolver for you. It's a dangerous weapon, you know."

He reached for the weapon, and the man drew back, a little baffled at the casualness of his behavior. "Hold it, Doc. I'm serious in wanting that formu-

la. And don't crowd me, or I'll shoot."

"That's absurd," said Payne, and snatched at the gun.

The revolver exploded in what seemed like a continuous roar, and Horton Perry dived behind the desk. The bullets struck his son-in-law in the chest, but Payne did not fall. He merely staggered slightly under their impact, as they ricocheted from his body and fell to the floor.

It was the kind of thing Perry had never seen except in his secret reading of comic books, and he refused to believe it even though it was taking place before his eyes. The would-be burglar seemed to feel the same way about it. His eyes were wide and glassy, and he was swallowing nervously, his mouth open, and his breath coming through it as if he were a child seeing a stage magician for the first time.

SUDDENLY the miscreant snapped out of his stupor. Reversing the revolver, he struck Payne over the head with it. Payne staggered again, and seemed annoyed. The revolver butt shattered, and fell to the floor.

The man was running for his life, when Payne threw a handful of cashews at him. Three of them caught him on the head, and he gave a howl of pain. Then he was gone, and Payne turned to face his father-in-law.

"You—you aren't hurt?" Perry asked doubtfully.

"Of course not. Those bullets couldn't penetrate my skin."

"It wasn't a trick? I mean, you didn't hypnotize me, and make me think I saw all this?"

"I can't hypnotize any one. I had simply treated my own skin by the same method I had developed for use on those cashews. It is now impenetrable by ordinary means."

"The same as the cashews?"

"Well, yes."

"You haven't advanced an inch in solving that problem we talked about last year?"

"The theoretical questions involved are much more complicated than I had

thought," Payne said absently. "I think that if you read my papers—"

"I've tried to. I can't."

"Yes, that's the trouble with our educational system. Imagine an adult—"

"Don't make any dirty cracks about my education!" cried Perry.

"I had no intention of being insulting. What troubles me is, that I don't know how I can explain. Fundamentally, it's a matter of surface forces. If we can align the atoms or groups of atoms, eliminate tiny cracks, and do away with a certain anisotropy—"

"What?"

"Do away with directional weakness. In many substances, certain directions are weaker than others. It's easier to split wood or cut steak with the grain than against it, to split crystals along certain planes than along others, and so on. That's why part of the task is to realign the atoms in such a way as to do away with directional weakness, or anisotropy."

"You can do that?"

"You've seen the results."

"How does that help salt stick to nuts?"

"As I've said, that requires further theoretical study."

Perry turned on his heel, and talking to himself in the manner of his own son-in-law, left the room.

Stewart Payne was an excellent family man. Three years later, while dandling his youngest grandson on his knee and watching Angela prepare the others for bed, Horton Perry was forced to admit that. And Angela had every right to be proud of her children, although she seemed to be most especially proud of her husband, who had become a full professor long before the end of the expected ten-year period, and was now earning \$5600 a year.

"He'll probably get the Physical Society Prize, the Chemical Society Prize, and the Prize of the Technological Society. His surface-hardening method has so many possible applications that it's incredible."

"We still salt nuts the same way," said Perry stubbornly.

"Did you see what the *Herald-Tribune* wrote about him? And the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*? and the *London Times*? And the *Moscow Pravda*?"

"He took that five hundred dollars of mine under false pretenses."

"Nonsense, Father, he's been working on your problem all the time. Somewhat indirectly, I'll admit. But he hasn't forgotten you."

"Hasn't he? He looks at me as if he'd never seen me in his life."

"It isn't that, Father. He's ashamed to look you straight in the eye because he pities you."

"Pities me?" stammered the astounded salted-nut king.

"Yes, he thinks you're so impractical."

Perry exploded, his new teeth shooting out of his mouth and bouncing off the wall. His grandson almost fell off his lap and began to wail, Angela shrieked, the other children joined their brother, and in the excitement, Perry managed to get a few repressed thoughts off his chest, somewhat mangled as he tried to articulate them with toothless gums, but to the point nevertheless.

PERRY had to admit later, however, their expression did him no real good. For the situation that had aroused his fury continued to exist, and even to grow worse. It was not until many years later, when he spoke to his great-great-great grandson, Alan, a sensible young man who after many generations had inherited the Perry business sense, that he felt he was talking to some one who understood him.

Alan at this time was a lad of twelve, alert, sharp-eyed, and with a mind that to the still vigorous Horton Perry seemed as sharp as a razor.

"I don't see great-great-grandfather Payne very often," he said. "But when I do, he always seems to have his head in the clouds."

"Right, my lad," agreed Horton Perry. "He never sees the trees for the woods." He thought that over, and said, "Or maybe it's the other way around.

But at any rate, he doesn't."

"Great scientist, though, Ancestor."

"That's what they say. But they can't convince me."

"You're prejudiced, Ancestor."

"Not at all. I'm merely a practical man, and I judge by results. We've gone forward a great deal in the past few generations. We mature earlier—"

"At twelve," observed Alan. "I'm mature now."

"Almost," admitted old Perry. "We live longer—two hundred years or more, on the average, thanks to halting the onset of tissue and organ degeneration. We stay healthier during those two hundred years. We produce houses and buildings that are practically everlasting, we travel to Mars and Venus, we have weapons and tools that will shatter any known material, as well as materials that will resist any tools but those processed by the same method. We can build structures that will resist an atomic explosion that takes place inside them. We've turned the miracle into the commonplace so often that it's the commonplace that is now a miracle."

"That sounds good, Ancestor," said Alan respectfully. "What does it mean?"

"You'll learn," replied the old man airily. "What I'm getting at is this—that all these results were practical. But Stewart Payne didn't think them up."

"You'll have to admit, though, that he contributed. Without his surface-hardening process, our tissues and organs would degenerate as before. We wouldn't mature at twelve and live to two hundred. We wouldn't stay as healthy as we are. Without hardened surfaces, our houses and buildings would weather and wear out in the same old way. We wouldn't have superpenetrating tools and atomic-resisting surfaces. We wouldn't have meteor-proof rocket ships, and even the Moon might still be out of our reach."

"Don't tell me that you admire the old man," said Perry in alarm.

"I think I do, Ancestor. He could be more practical, but for the theoretical type, he didn't do so badly."

"Maybe he didn't but I did. The day I

met him was the most disappointing day of my life. Threw five hundred dollars out of the window just because that fellow promised—”

Perry interrupted himself. “Have some of these delicious Martian treknuts, Alan.”

“Thanks, Ancestor. Kind of salty,

aren’t they? Must have come out of the bottom of the box.”

Perry smiled sourly. “Promised results in a week—and it’s over a hundred and thirty years, and he still hasn’t solved it. He just isn’t the practical type, lad. After all this time, that should be clear enough.”

THE ETHER VIBRATES

(Continued from page 9)

So Simon emerges from his case for the first time in the long history of this series and acquires a borrowed body for a brief but critical period. He finds himself thoroughly hampered and ill-at-ease in his unaccustomed fleshly trappings and is almost betrayed by them into failure to fulfill the function he sets out to achieve.

This is Captain Future in top form as reintroduced last year and packs all the tight-wire suspense and freedom of space which the Futuremen and those who read about them have come rightly to expect.

Our short-story list is well up to par—and if any of the stories have to do with brains as such we shall be very much surprised. But they can’t miss being good with the inventory on hand. And Your Editor will be handling the editorial and other features as usual. Better stick around for a copy or six.

ETHERGRAMS

THE gang is out in force as usual via the U.S. Mails. For some reason the shorties have multiplied this issue and, again as usual, we’ll deal with them first. Shortest of all is—

AM I BLUE? by W. H. Doyle

To you who won’t give us a sequel for THE BLUE FLAMINGO—how come?—1045 West Mistletoe, San Antonio, Texas.

We recently ran afoul of Flamingo Author Hannes Bok and asked him virtually the same question. Quoth he—“Too busy drawing pictures at present.” Sorry.

NO LETTER? by Bob Silverberg

Dear Editor: No letter this month—I’ll wait until a few of

mine get published. THE LADY IS A WITCH was terrific—short stories good. Some Hall of Fame suggestions—BRAIN STEALERS OF MARS by J. W. Campbell, Jr., TWS 4/36—THE METAL WORLD by Ed Earl Repp, SCIENCE WONDER, 10/29—ditto INTO THE SUBCONSCIOUS by Ray Myers from that issue—THE THIEVES FROM ISOT by Eando Binder, WONDER, 10/34. How about these? How about some Paul covers for the new FSQ?—760 Montgomery Street, Brooklyn 13, New York.

Thanks for liking LADY IS A WITCH. As for the oldies, you have a very good chance of seeing most of them either as HoF yarns or in FSQ or WSA. Also possibly some of the Paul covers.

HE LOVE HoF by Ed Wood

Dear Editor: Here’s one fan that likes the HoF. As a suggestion for one of your new magazines why not reprint the entire VIA series? There must be over 20 stories in the series, many of them very well done. How many fans remember the GAG that the editor of that day put over on us?

For SS how’s about Frank Phillips’ ONSLAUGHT FROM VENUS? It certainly impressed me as one of the best of the “invasion” school of science fiction. It was a shame that he didn’t write more stf.—31 North Aberdeen Street, Chicago 7, Illinois.

We’ll look into both the VIA series and the GAG—both of which came long before our active participation in stf. As for the Phillips yarn, we agree but will hold it for a bit. After all, we just ran Fletcher Pratt’s THE ONSLAUGHT FROM RIGEL in WSA.

UM-UM-MMM! by Donald V. Allgeier

Gentlemen: All I can say about the cover of the March STARTLING is Um-um-mm! And a long low whistle! If witches look like that and dress like that, then it’s me for the days of witchcraft again.

I’m glad to see fantasy in your pages. But I’m wondering about your statement that pretty girls sell magazines. Do they sell them to the right people? Or does the browser who looks at all girlie mags just look and not buy?—Columbus, O.

So far he has usually bought—and this goes from the big slicks to the most humble of joke-filled one-shots.

ENCROACHED by Alfred B. Ronner

Dear Sir: Just finished ENCROACHMENT by Raymond F. Jones in your March 1950 SS. I missed my morning’s work as I simply couldn’t put it down. I honestly believe it’s one of the finest stories I ever read. It must be to compel me to sit

down and actually write you about it.—Memphis 12, Tennessee.

Tres charmant—tell us more!

HUMDINGER by Gwen Cunningham

Dear Editor: First off the cover was a humdinger on the March issue. What a witch! THE LADY IS A WITCH was a good story too and I compliment Daniels on his fine writing.

MEN MUST DIE was okay and ENCROACHMENT was very good, while THE SIGN AND THE MESSAGE was interesting and thought-provoking, which is to me the best kind of story, however short.

Matt Lee's APPOINTMENT IN NEW UTRECHT was fair but still worth reading and as usual the editorials and book reviews were highlights of interest to me. Finlay's artwork lately hasn't been up to par—not in the workmanship, which is always good, but in subject matter—although this issue is full of wonderful bits. Even the small insert on page 12 was a honey.

All in all a fine issue—and all I ask is that you go on, trying anyhow to do as well. If you do I'll never let you down.—8519 MacArthur Boulevard, Oakland 5, California.

Sorry you don't like Finlay's newer styles et cetera. We still find him pretty wonderful. But for the rest thanks. Gwen. Hey—you've been writing us off and on for quite a while now, *n'est-ce pas?* Thanks again for the faithfulness.

ADD—SCIENTISTS' WIVES by Anna Lee McLeod

Dear Editor: You might add scientists' wives as one of your species of Science Fiction readers. In fact I discovered science fiction under my husband's guidance.

As I read the March issue of STARTLING STORIES from cover to cover for the purpose of writing this letter (between summons from my four-month-old baby daughter, Snooksey, who will undoubtedly grow up to be a science-fiction fan also) here goes. The cover was a very great improvement over the one on the January ish.

And now for criticisms. "The Lady Is a Witch" was enticing, interesting, I could hardly put the book down, but the ending was weak. I am sure that the author had another ending in mind—why could Priscilla not have been beautiful and have materialized and married Bill? Such things can be done in the realm of stf.

"Men Must Die" I just noticed has already won its glory as a HoF novelet and I also thought it very good. I like reasonably short stories so please put in more if you can.

"The Sign and the Message" certainly had a quick and surprising ending after all the suspense built up. One wonders just how successful the fraternization with the lizard-people was. Another ending which seems as if there should be more (as has been made mention of in Ethergrams past).

"Encroachment" is a good story but it also suffers from a weak ending.

"Appointment in New Utrecht" I thought excellent. Perhaps this is good enough for the Hall of Fame.

Doggone, I sound like an old grandmother when my favorite Ethergram contributors are those corney Coles. The stuffy domestic picture wasn't at all intended. This is my first letter to a science fiction publication. Probably I'll get the hang of snappy repartee after a time. Wish someone would write to me.

Actually, being a Californian and in this part of the world for only about two years so far, I feel as lost as an explorer on Mars. So if anyone will write and cheer me up I would be very appreciative. True that I'm a novice at rating stf, but improvement comes with practice.

You want answers, Mrs. McLeod? Then for Pete's sake put your address at the foot of your next epistle. And let's have another soon.

We like the Coles too, when they take their feet off our editorial neck. Anyway, it's all in fun.

POST-NOEL by Noel Loomis

Dear Editor: I have read with a great deal of interest Mr. G. Lopez letter in SS for March, mentioning that science-

fiction has disregarded the dark races, and your agreement. What about MR. ZYTZTZ GOES TO MARS, which at one time I thought was such an out-and-out essay on intolerance that it would never be sold?

It has always seemed to me that Mr. Zytztz represented all the oppressed races of earth and of the universe; the intolerance shown to him is typical of the intolerance shown to the dark races, as the intolerance demonstrated by the Space Marines represents class distinction as universally practiced on this planet.

The Zitizes were not labeled as Negroes or Chinese or Javanese but weren't they endowed with all the attributes of oppressed minorities since history began on this one planet with the Exodus or the characteristics of minorities undoubtedly scattered through all the far corners of the cosmos since the Beginning?

I am thinking this over pretty seriously. I have looked through the issue following that story and I see that no reader put a finger on the racial intolerance theme. Now, with the knowledge that stf readers are more than ordinarily thoughtful and discerning, could it be that MZGTM missed the PHILIPUSTER?

It seems to me that any more pointed observation would be drum-beating, for which I do not care in fiction as it can do little but satisfy those who already believe with you; those who are opposed are only alienated when a fiction-writer deserts the cracker-box and assumes the soap-box.

I am sure that Mr. Lopez used "the dark races" broadly but I suggest that all of us have to use care to distinguish between the broad, abstract principle of tolerance, which is worth fighting for because it applies to those who now are oppressors as well as those who now are oppressed and who tomorrow may be the oppressors, and which thus is a true humanitarian principle—I say we must distinguish between the principle of tolerance and the specific wrongs of a specific group or of groups for these specific wrongs are only symptoms of the absence of the principle.

I do not mean to imply that we can overlook the specific wrongs because they do serve to bring the lack to our attention but we must be careful to separate the two in our minds. One calls for emotional treatment; the other calls for mental.

Maybe you would be interested in how Mr. Zytztz got his name. It seems a few years ago the small girls played a game called "Zitz" as they walked down the sidewalk. If you stepped on a crack it cost you one point; if you saw a bald-headed man, you got one point; if you saw a bearded man, you got five points; if you saw a woman soon to become a mother, you hollered "Zitzi" and got ten points.

The connection? None whatever, except that the sound itself seems to me to connote intolerance.—3914 Cedar Avenue, Minneapolis 7, Minnesota.

MR. ZYTZTZ GOES TO MARS, which ran in our companion magazine, THRILLING WONDER STORIES, in August, 1948, was indeed a potent portent for non-discrimination on an interplanetary and ultimately an interstellar plane. But as its hero was an alien and a vegetable to boot perhaps not enough of our readers caught the full human impact of the Loomisymbolism.

But you were not the only reader stirred to comment by the Lopez letter, to wit—

PEOPLE—AS PEOPLE! by Joe Gibson

Dear Ed.: That Lopez letter in the March ish brings up several points which you didn't mention in your editorial reply—but which I think are rather obvious.

First, this isn't the first time the racial aspect has been brought up in science-fiction. Having read stf about twice as long as Lopez has, I can just vaguely remember a few stf tales did consider racial matters, though I don't remember any of 'em in TWS or SS. Also, it's an old subject in fan-gabs and has been kicked around time and again as a gang of fans sat around discussing matters of galactic and/or cosmic import—as fans are wont to do.

Now Lopez asks what will happen to the dark races of the world—if science-fiction authors think the races will intermarry until the dark races disappear—and I think I can answer for a good many fans, if not for the authors.

Any sort of super-civilization of the future with anti-gravity devices and what not is bound to make the planet Earth a fairly small community relatively speaking. A fellow might have his home in Honolulu, commute by rocket to his office in London and take his girl to dinner on the Moon.

In that age, the main street of any town on Earth is likely to have Chinese, Russians, Indians, Morros, Filipinos, French,

German, Zulus, Brazilians and maybe an Eskimo or two. For anyone to have racial prejudices would be akin to having a communicable cancer. It's fairly certain, human nature being what it is, that not only will the different "races" begin to intermingle but the different languages will begin to fuse together!

And what will result? Why, our fine descendants who go traveling to the other stars at super-light speeds are probably going to be big-boned, husky lads with slanted eyes and light mulatto skin! In a mass-intermingling the Oriental traits are bound to predominate due to simple majority, of course. So it should be me asking, "What's to become of my so-called white race?"

The answer is—vanished! Extinct! And, I'm afraid, probably good riddance. Personally, I think I'll join a nudist camp this summer and get myself a good healthy tan.

But a straight answer to Lopez' inquiries re the dark races is just that stf authors have tried to steer clear of racial problems, just as they try to stay clear of any political trends in their yarns involving Russia—that didn't go over so well, once. I heard one author tell a fan that he wished his stories could be written so that when a Negro read them, the characters would seem to be Negro—when a Chinese read them, the characters would seem to be Chinese—and everyone could just forget any racial problems, differences and prejudices existed.

Swell, but stories just aren't written that way—it would be difficult, to say the least. And probably the real reason the dark races haven't been represented in stf is that they, as readers, haven't expressed a wish to be included as they rightfully should be. Have you ever thought, Ed., that there are probably 1,000 active fans, enthusiasts of the stf field, yet there doesn't seem to be one Negro or Chinese among them? Have you ever wondered about the letters in TEV and TRS—whether the members of the dark races are writing in to represent themselves as they actually should?

You probably can't blame them in a way. Even in fandom we have characters of late who've been raving that old white supremacy theory. But also in fandom there are a good many guys like myself who have nothing but complete disgust for such characters. In fact I'm having difficulty in avoiding the use of unprintable phrases even in writing about them. So maybe the dark races would find more tolerance in the stf field than they would find in any other group of people. Why don't a few of them try us? I'd certainly welcome them.

But as it is I'm left wondering even if there are any Negro or Oriental or even Hindu or Mohammedan readers of science-fiction! I've never met one and I think it's a lousy shame. We certainly don't have any anti-Catholic or anti-Jewish prejudices in fandom! At least, not in my set, we don't!

I think there ought to be science-fiction stories which directly concern the future of today's world, including the outcome of having a Police State like Russia around and an—to me—insidious ideology like Communism. Also, your readers who support your stand for fatalism in stf with their "war is inevitable" attitude make me a trifle sick.

Sure it's easier to dramatize a story with fatalistic tragedy—it's an excellent gimmick for a lazy writer! As for wars there are wars and wars. An outfit called The Damon Runyon Cancer Fund is fighting a war right now against one of mankind's most terrible enemies. Giving in to fatalism is, by the way, playing into another enemy's hands—to wit, surrendering to ignorance.

Anyone who cares to look into the matter might discover that it would be easier to wipe out all the ants on Earth than it would be to wipe out all the human beings. Let's not have any traitors in our midst, please, dear deluded editor. One of the requirements of that Universal law or survival of the fittest is for the individual to prove that he's fit to survive!—24 Kensington Avenue, Jersey City 4, New Jersey.

P.S. First, let me add hastily that in saying readers of other races should "rightfully" express their opinions on our exalted stf, I did not mean they deserve "special benefits"—but merely that it's wrong for them to feel their opinions aren't wanted. Gads, man, we had trouble enough convincing female readers their opinions are appreciated!

But here's my report: since writing that letter on the matter of dark races, brought up in TEV by G. Lopez, I've taken the trouble to check on Miss Lopez. Yeh, chum, I said Miss! Her name and address—first name, Gertrudis—appeared in a competitor magazine. And, you may note, her address is within walking distance of mine.

First, though, I wrote her—and hit the right note from the beginning. Then I walked. Miss Lopez is of Portuguese and Negro descent. Personally, she's a small lively girl with a surprising energy and charming good-natured humor.

I have given her fandom's well-known welcome sign—talked science-fiction, fantasy, authors and galactic civilization and time-travel with her and unloaded a number of fanzines for her to study. Anyone experiencing first contact with fandom is faced with considerable studying—of the strange unearthly creatures called fans.

And frankly I'm hoping others will read this and take note. Dear old editor, I am not interested in racial problems but I am interested in people—most fans I know are interested in people—and the interesting thing about people is that they come in all sizes. To wit, leave us not quibble over minor things like hereditary sun-fans. People are people and it's fun to meet them.

The only significance I can find in this occasion is that

Trudy Lopez is a pioneer and I hope a whole lot of new science-fiction enthusiasts follow her. We could use some readers, couldn't we, ed? (Funny—every time I start to type "ed" it comes out "de"—which became "Dear" above, but—) But the one thing Trudy doesn't like, and I certainly don't blame her, is to meet these so-called "liberal" characters who merely want to prove how "open-minded" they are. It would be a mistake to consider this any "race" issue.

The important thing is that there is no such issue in stf. Let this be proof of the pudding to other readers who may read our mags and yet hesitate to join in because of their different skin complexion. Sure, they'll find some prejudice amongst us—but I honestly believe most of us have no such prejudices.

After all, we fans are a bit (ahem) inhuman, ourselves—we really come in all sizes!

If we failed to find your motives and reason, on the whole, admirable, Joe, we should not have run your double-barreled epistle at such length, even though your tone seems a bit brash at times. Glad to know Miss Lopez' identity and gender. We hope she becomes a more regular correspondent.

However, we wonder whether the so-called white races are going to be quite so easy to eliminate. Like most weedish organisms they have proved the devil itself to eradicate in the past. A comparatively few Scots traders of the Hudson's Bay Company took only a few generations to bleach several hundred thousand Canadian Indians almost white. That is one for the geneticists to settle.

In this column we have had Hindu and other Oriental readers in the past few years from time to time. As to Negroes, who's to say? We certainly don't demand racial purity certificates with each submission. As for fatalism, we don't see how to avoid it in time travel themes unless the multiple parallel time-track theorem is supported.

With you, we remain interested in people as people rather than anything else—except possibly as BEMs.

STOP THOSE COLES! by Les & Es Cole

Dear Anon: Whup! Stop the presses! Comes now the denouement. We played a low trick on you readers out there, but we are trying to see if you were on your toes. The case is analogous to that of the tree Sequoia. The first botanists over here—the English ones—decided that *S. sempervirens* would be called Wellingtonia. Then came the revolution, and Wellingtonia became Washingtonia. This led to the formation of the fourteenth state—that of Confusion—so the boys got together and called it Sequoia.

"So what?" you may ask. Well, in the March issue we carefully baited a trap with the statement, "... Eohippus is the name of a beetle or some such insect and not that of a horse." We reiterate, "Eohippus is the name of a South American beetle." Y'see fellas and gals, the boys got together again a couple of years back and—this is hot scoop and hasn't reached the texts yet—and decided that since the beetle Eohippus had precedence over the horse Eohippus, why the horse would become Hyracotherium which it remains to this day.

But this is in the form of a plea. One, who signed himself E. O. Hippus and remarked that all geologists have holes in their heads, had too wonderful a sense of humor to remain anonymous. Whoever you are, let us hear from you!

Wallah! Back to business. Who is Norman A. Daniels? Where has he been keeping himself? "The Lady Is a Witch" was one of the finest fantasy pieces we've read since Unknown went kaput. In fact, it'd rank among the best there too. More! If our vote means anything.

And we've even a few kind things to say to you. (It must

be a hangover from the recently defunct "holiday" season; we're still overflowing—with good will, that is!) Your stock rose 18¼ points with us when we read that crack of yours concerning "The Astounding Exodus." We see in you the beginnings of a twisted outre unconventional sense of humor similar to ours. Anyway, let us hasten to advise that we were not including you in that business on "geology expertism." We had in mind two other stf editors. One may be dismissed with a wave of the palm and the other, while we won't mention any names, just better stick to his nuclear physics and leave rates of evolution and sedimentation alone. It's schist too bad you misspelled igneous, you-ijolite-you, but we'll granite a fava in view of the tuff time you had with geology at collitch. (What one?) But don't let it throw us—we knew a gal, a political science major, who was cute, intelligent, humorous, fybate, Ph.D., etc., and who never got a grade lower than "B" in eight years—except in Geology 2, wherein she received a "D." She couldn't tell arfvedsonite from barkevikite and we doubt if you could (we even doubt if we could!) but she's making more money than the senior author and you're making more money than the senior author and the junior author is making more money than the senior author and all platitudes aside, making money seems to be the more important. But we're sorry you found geology distasteful. When and if we get to N'yawk perhaps we can enlighten thee.

And Son-of-the-Sun, what did you mean by that poem in the March issue? We must be suffering from some mental blockage but we just couldn't get it to make sense. Ours was a parody on that old limerick which starts

"There was a young man from Dundee
Who da-da-da-da in a tree
Etc."

We couldn't get yours to fit—even tho we did have a lot of fun recalling all the feelthee limericks we knew.

It's too bad this has gone on as long as it has because we really wanted a) tell you of three very Dunnesque dreams the senior author had, b) inquire whether you'd like to know what we'd consider the ideal format for an stf mag, and c) recount a discussion we have with he-who-shall-remain-nameless concerning space warfare. So instead, we shall steal silently away with only these last two items:

1. Thanks muchly for them kind words, Clarence L. Jacobs, and may we someday shine your shoes?

2. All stf fans, we know, will be interested in this. The last time we were in Los Angeles we heard on good authority (A Goldwyn casting-office secretary and an independent publicity agent) that "Hollywood" is planning two "A" pictures, release dates in late spring or early summer, on trips to the Moon. The vehicles were in the foetal—nay, embryonic—stage when we received the news, so we have no info concerning cast, direction, etc.—1204 Nogales St., Del Paso Heights, Calif.

We have finally emerged with our own rather obvious theory as to how and where and why Eohippus was scientifically altered from "dawn horse" to some sort of beetle. It is our unassailable hunch that some weightily-degreed gentleman of the retort-filled cloistered ivy decided his erudition would enable him to amplify his income through a visit to Santa Anita, Hialeah, Jamaica, Saratoga, Pimlico, Lexington or some equivalent sucker trap devoted to breed improvement.

There he suffered the usual fate of the horse player and began to pick up the lingo of same. Now almost everybody knows that a horse which fails to win, place or show when odds, weights, competition and track are right is quickly relegated to the canine genus. If the beast keeps on losing he becomes a beetle in the vocabulary of his pocket-light supporters. The rest would seem to follow naturally enough.

As for limericks—well, there are still the post-office authorities to consider but we do have a few pips filed away. You almost certainly know them all. Glad you liked LADY IS A WITCH. Norm Daniels is a prolific magazine writer whose best-known

contributions have been in the detective story field. However, he has occasionally turned his hand to stfantasy, as in the above and a novel published in this magazine some years back entitled SPEAK OF THE DEVIL.

We can't wait to hear your dreams of stformat.

BETTER LATE THAN EVER

by Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor: Today I picked up the January, 1950, issue of STARTLING STORIES. Before reading it I—as is my usual wont—gave the magazine a quick riffle. I noticed instantly that my name was mentioned twice in it, once in the first letter of the letter column (p. 142) and once in the book review (p. 160).

The thing that intrigued me was that in both cases, my name was spelled AZIMOV. Now actually substituting a Z for an S does not mean much. There will be no serious danger of confusing me with anyone else. It is not even important. However, through the years I have developed a sentimental attachment to my name and it is spelled ASIMOV.

Therefore, you would do me a great favor if, from your editor's swivel chair, you issued forth fulminations, lightning bolts and suggestion slips to the effect that whenever you see occasion to mention this humble personage, the name be spelled A with an S with an I with an M with an O with a V—or, in short, ASIMOV.

I notice van Vogt has "bronzed busts" and explicitly-stated "mistresses" in his lead novel. Tsk, task, this maddened post-war generation!—762 Broadway, Somerville 44, Massachusetts.

All right, Issac, we respect your sentimentality as of this instant. It is pleasant to find you residing in the home city of Amelia Earhart and "Shanty" Hogan, (the original, not Jimmy Dorsey's girl-vocalist). Now, how about writing us some stories we can buy? Then we can really do a job on your by-line.

MORE COMMENT ON LOPEZ

by Jack M. Bickham

Dear Sir: I read with interest the letter of "G. Lopez" in the March issue of SS. I should like to answer it.

The fact that the "dark races" are not mentioned in stf is, to me, encouraging. I believe that the race of man is unimportant. The quality of man is what counts. The authors of stf seem to feel the same way. They believe that in the future the color of a person's skin will be so unimportant that it does not need mentioning. Many characters in stf could be Negroes—what difference does it make?

Enough of that—to change the subject, I must admit I like THE LADY IS A WITCH probably because it was similar in tone to DEVILS FROM DARKONIA, my favorite fantasy novel. Speaking of fantasy, where can I get THE FOX WOMAN complete? I read the fragment by Merritt a year ago and I have been wondering about it ever since. If Bok finished it it must be good.

It was with more than a touch of nostalgia that I read your reply to Private Jacobs. Lord! How long have Snaggie and Wart Ears been in the outer galaxy? I have always had mixed emotions on their exile. In one way it was good—because the serious fans now can get a word in edgewise. In another way, however, I am sorry. The Sarge, Snaggie and company were the funnest people in modern fiction. I miss those "purple meat maggots."

I have an idea—why not divide TEV into two parts? One half for serious comment and discussion, the other for the old Sarge. That would be perfect.

Sorry to have written such a long letter but I had to blow off. I guess the reason we fans write so much is because we are so darn proud of our mags and want to help improve them still more.—767 Racine Avenue, Columbus 4, Ohio

We're glad you blew off, Jack. A nice letter, though how are we to separate sheep from goats among the letters and come up with any sort of columnar unity (no

cracks, please) escapes us at present. And we never found the Sarge & Co. that funny. Maybe it's because we had to write them.

We have a strong hunch that appearance of your letter will result in unsolicited information as to where and for how much you can get the complete FOX WOMAN. Bok did his usually competent job on finishing it up. At any rate any of the numerous stf dealers and many of the fans have it.

DISCOVERED AT LAST! by Molly Hardy

Dear Editor: I have just discovered your magazine and I am simply delighted with it! I have been interested in science fiction for about a year now and before I saw your mag I had to depend on the Public Library to supply my stf needs. Now the Public Library has just so many books on stf and while they are very good I do get a bit tired of reading the same volumes over and over again. I guess that by now you can realize how glad I was when I found your mag (hidden under westerns and detectives to be sure, but there none the less).

The list of stf books you have in the magazine is very helpful to me because I can find hardly any in the bookstores around here for love or blood. Your March issue was pretty good on the whole. My rating is as follows—

ENCROACHMENT—marvelous idea!

THE LADY IS A WITCH—good fantasy.

MEN MUST DIE—good idea but I didn't like the writing too well.

THE SIGN AND THE MESSAGE—very very funny—I liked it fine.

APPOINTMENT IN NEW UTRECHT—new clever twist on an old theme.

As you can see I'm not very adept as yet at criticism but I hope to learn fast so that my letters will be really helpful—I hope!

I just received two new stf books—EARTH ABIDES by Stewart and an anthology of yours, FROM OFF THIS WORLD. Both are terrific! I'm much pleased.

The department I enjoy most of all in SS is THE ETHER VIBRATES. The letters just tickle the life out of me and believe me it gives me a boost to find so many people who are really interested in stf. I have located only two other people I know (boys) who are as crazy about it as I am.

The squabble about the covers makes no dent in me. I'm seventeen and I guess that's a little young to really have opinions—but I know what I like and it's your mag!—6447 Washington, Kansas City, Missouri.

You'd better get hep to our life-long companion magazines, THRILLING WONDER STORIES, Molly—also our newer mates. FANTASTIC STORY QUARTERLY and WONDER STORY ANNUAL. You should have a fine revel in all of them if you like SS as much as you say. We have a hunch your "lonely" fan days are ended.

REGARDING STRAUSS-ED CONTROVERSY, SS, MARCH, '50 by W. E. Curtis

When I was perusing the STARTLING 'GRAMS, I happened upon Richard Strauss' rhythmic stanzas
Complaining of wobbling rhythm and rhyme
Our editor renders us time after time.

I do like a verse that goes "bum bitty bum,"
With plot that is lucid, a beat I can strum,
To heck with the spelling, and grammar gets a nose,
But please keep your lines even'd up, Richard Strauss.

And editor, dear, how you addle my brain
With words that have meanings, I cannot explain.
Your lines could be even, your "bum bitties" neat,
But what good would that be when I have to stop reading
and look up things like "yodeled Richard Strauss" and
find that, in archaic English, it means the man's name is

Richard Strauss and you hadn't made some rich comment on the man that I shouldn't miss, but, by that time, I've lost the beat?

—201 Veterans Village, Canton, New York.

P.S. I'm really not too conservative to appreciate bumpy poetry and obscure references. It's just that I have fun writing silly pomes too. The way you do.

So the language we use has you just a bit beaten.

*It ranges from Aalii to Zyzzogeton
And if these two turn you a sickly peagreen
There are nearly a half million beauts in between.*

*Alas, knowledge comes not from burning
of joss sticks*

You'll learn a lot more doing all Double-Crostics

*And crosswords and word games should
soon make you very*

Proud of the breadth of your vocabulary.

As you can see, dear W. E. we just like you like silly pomes too.

YOU'RE SO VERY WELCOME! by Ralph Packard

Dear Ed: Many thanks for APPOINTMENT IN NEW UTRECHT. It was by far the best story in the March issue even though it was short—too short. The other stories were fair and what THE LADY IS A WITCH lacks didn't matter too much because Virgil Finlay sure made up for it with his magnificent illustrations on pages 14 and 15. Man, he's the Lovecraft of the artist world.—Poynette, Wis.

We might call this one brief and very much to the Poynette—and then again we might not.

REQUEST by Pamela Ballard

Dear Editor: It has probably been said many times but I repeat—this is the very first letter I have ever written to any kind of magazine, least of all to an stf publication. I haven't been reading the stuff very long but have recently become an addict to put it mildly. Being a comparative newcomer I shan't venture to criticize the stories. I like 'em all—including the letter column and the book and fanzine reviews. Which brings me to the reason for this letter.

I raided a small second-hand magazine shop the other day and among the spoils was the March, 1949, issue of SS. In your column was printed a letter from "Anonymous." Could you possibly send me his address—or tell me how to get in touch with him? I would like to write. Being a rather lonely person myself I'd enjoy corresponding with others (just from a desire for friendship). I have many friends here but none who are remotely interested in stf or allied subjects—fantasy, horror, ghost and murder, also fairy and folk tales, myths, etc. I would enjoy letters from others too.—The Berkeley Residence, 40 Berkeley Street, Boston 16, Massachusetts.

Enclose a stamped unaddressed envelope with your letter to anonymous—seal it if you prefer its contents to remain unread, Pamela—and send it to us. We shall be glad to forward it to him and he can write you or not as he wishes (confidentially, we haven't the slightest doubt that he will). Also, you should be hearing from plenty of other imaginative folk around Boston.

HE LAUGH, HE SNEER! by A. E. Hitch

Dear Editor: I've been reading your mag for quite a while

but have not dared to write you lest someone rhyme my name. Obscenity, what?

"The Lady Is a Witch" was well written and had such a good plot that I hated to see it come to an end. Surely Priscilla will be raising more trouble up New England way. Ted Powell's short had an unusual gimmick—let's have more of him also.

Now we come to "Encroachment." I laugh, I sneer. After giving us such semantic warning that time is not an object the author falls into his own li'l trap. Jones should know better. For time to be dispersed thru the universe from some galactic center and be stolen particle by particle implies that the author is still thinking of time as capable of being broken down into quanta, which makes it matter.

According to Einstein, DeSitter, Minkowski and the boys, you cannot speak of just time or space by itself at all but always as space-time. As such it is an integral part of the framework of the universe, the rate of change, of increasing entropy. Without entropy there would be nothing to measure time with anyway. There would be no more difference between past and future than right and left.

Roses for the illustrator! The cover was excellent and I at least shall carry it around without shame. She's cute. And the violinist on p. 112 was good.

This Bill Venable is a gootch. SS has no holes, needs him not. His letters are puerile, he has literary indigestion. Don Clark, on the other hand, had some very good ideas. Unpleasant to the eyes as cripples and defectives seem, they are often the benefactors of mankind—the greatest authors, the most creative musicians, the most sensitive artists.

While the strong physically may often devote their lives to taking things forcibly from the "weaker" and this makes them "dynamic personalities" I think each has his place. Maybe science will be able to prevent or cure all diseases sometime in the near future without aid of the gas chamber or compulsory oophorectomies and x-radiations.—8006 Janis, Utica, Mich

We didn't mind ENCROACHMENT—nor your quibble anent same. Picking pretty lean lint, aren't you, old man, old man, old man? We also have a slight femur to pick with you in the defective division.

Granted the overcoming of a nervous or physical handicap often gives its conqueror the discipline and direction needed to attain remarkable results—as the problem of being sidelined often gives him perspective on the human parade. But for the most part genius has been found to go hand in hand with superior physical endowments right down the line.

Insisting that weakness breeds genius is a little like insisting that all poor people are nice. It sometimes doesn't and they sometimes aren't. In short, it's simply another instance of Aesop's old sour grape thesis.

FIRST TRY

by Mrs. Audrey Angenhofer

Dear Editor: This is my first try at writing a fan letter although I have been a reader of stf for a year and a half. I want to comment on the last two issues of STARTLING STORIES.

Since I first began reading stf I have occasionally noted comments from other readers on the stories of Captain Future. I tried to get hold of some old copies of CF but without success. So I was very glad to see his reappearance in the January SS. I was naturally curious to find out just how good these stories really were and I enjoyed it very much—in fact I liked it better than the lead novel, THE SHADOW MEN. The other stories were good.

As for the March issue, the lead novel, THE LADY IS A WITCH, was one of the best stf stories I have ever read. It is somewhat different from most. I will close on this note, save to ask whether anyone has any Edgar Rice Burroughs books he would like to get rid of. I would also like to get hold of Merritt's sequel to THE MOON POOL. Keep up the good work. You'll be hearing from me again before long.—P.O. Box No. 454 Milbank South Dakota.

We shall be delighted, Audrey. Sorry THE SHADOW MEN threw you. It was

pretty tricky to an stf newcomer—as well as to plenty of veteran readers. Hope you get responses to your requests for Burroughs and Merritt.

BACKTALK

by Eliot S. Hermon

Dear Editor: After many a year I've finally decided to start talking back when I find things in the magazines I either do or do not like. Of the March '50 issue I've little but good to say—Daniels was pretty good, and it was a pleasure to re-read the Hall of Fame story after all these years since it first appeared, and Jones' story was good except for the conclusion.

However, where in the name of Klono's brazen bowels did you dig up the rest of the guff in this issue? Change the names and the titles and I've read both of those stories not once but fifty times. Perhaps I'm unnecessarily harsh or perhaps I've grown blase in the seventeen years that I've been reading science-fiction and fantasy, but surely you have a backlog of better stories that you could have used in place of those two shorts.

The interior art work is good, with one exception. Finlay, in my opinion one of the best ever, can do no wrong, and the illo on "Appointment in New Utrecht" is okay. Astarita, as usual, is excellent, though he picked up a couple of spare Terrans in the picture but I don't think much of the "Sign and Message" artist. The cover is another story altogether. Where in the story did the artist get his inspiration?

Having reached the art-work and covers, I want to bring up two of my pet peeves. The first is that I would like to know who the artists are, even when they don't want to be known themselves, so how about a byline, either in the story or the table of contents? The second peeve is this: Why did Norman Daniels make Thaddeus Link a parapsychologist? I'm a parapsychologist myself, and I know that most reputable parapsychologists associate with ghosts in a debunking capacity only. You could check with Prof. Gardner Murphy at CCNY, if you wish. Prof. Murphy is a leader in the field of parapsychology and has been for twenty years.

Last but not least—how about setting up the magazine with the bottom edges of the pages lined up instead of the tops. I have several hundred magazines on my shelves and in order to set them up, I have been trimming the bottoms of your publications with a hacksaw. That's a lot of work over eleven years and it isn't always too neat.

Well, that gets most of my accumulated gripes off my chest. I've enjoyed almost every issue since "The Black Flame" and I'm looking forward to at least eleven more years of your magazine. Keep it up—we all love you.—4722 Snyder Ave., Brooklyn 3, N. Y.

Guff, he calls it! Well, now we can all go out and have a horse race—or do they call them all beetles nowadays? We, for one, wouldn't know. Blame that parapsychologist on Ye Ed—he made the change from some sort of mathematician in preparing LADY IS A WITCH for the printer. As for edges—well, we can only hope your hacksaw holds out. Thanks for a very decent letter and please write us again anon.

OH-OH, ANOTHER PO'

by Marion "Astra" Zimmer Bradley

Dear old Nonny Mouse: This is Friday the thirteenth and your unlucky day. I'm sending you some singing telegrams and some presents for your authors:

Your magazine ne'er will grow rich
Printing yarns like THE LADY'S A WITCH
For your fans will shriek screams
It will give them bad dreams
And they'll toss your old mag in the ditch.

One onion, express collect, for author Daniels.

MEN MUST DIE, of course they must.
If they don't, their brains will rust.
Except in mags where authors all
Save them with brains mechanical.
But it's no use
To have them live
To see the Light of Days
For though they live,
The Lubians
Will get them anyway.

A big bouquet of roses for the funeral of a good story which had to be dragged out and disinterred and re-interred in the HALL OF FAME. Deliver to Ward Hawkins or his grave.

ENCROACHMENT usually means an invasion of roaches; This time-yarn was truly something ferocious Although the theory was atrocious.

One cockroach in the form of a time-bomb to author Jones.

Bubble, bubble, toil and trouble
Come the spacemen on the double;
Midst the angry planet's rubble
Scaly BEMS chew Dubble-bubble.

One large sloppy bubble to burst in author Ted Powell's face, shipped by rocket mail to a chorus of loud yak-yaks.

To you dear Editor, the bill for the clothespins I wore out on my nose, trying to read your lead novel. Just be glad I don't send you that bill for the plastic surgery after I took the clothespins off. And as a special present to the editor, the following telegram:

Happy Bem days to you,
Sappy STARTLINGS TO you;
If you don't get good stories
You will lose all your glories;
Happy Bem days, drippy stf days, Sappy STARTLINGS to you.

Stand up and cheer for one tremendous flop of an issue. Better luck next time, old boy.—309A 9th St., Levelland, Texas.

*Onions, roses, roach and bubble
Our authors get for all their trouble.
Oh, fancy fan of yesteryear,
Now you'd have us rise and cheer
An ish that made your hackles rise.
How can we cut you down to size?*

*Let's concentrate on vengeance sweet
Perhaps we'll ship some poisoned meat,
Strew marbles on your bedroom floor,
Or poise some water on your door,
But let us cease this wild effluve
And hope our new ish you approve.
Next case, please.*

WE HAD IT FIRST by Roger N. Dard

Dear Sir: In your March 1949 ish, you published a letter of mine in which I suggested it would be a good idea to bring out a Quarterly—or even an Annual—of classic reprints. I now learn that you are bringing out a Quarterly—and are even giving consideration to bringing out an Annual! Pal, that is what I call service, it certainly does a fan good to know he is fulfilling some useful function in writing to his favorite prozine, and that any suggestions he will make will receive serious consideration, and not automatically be consigned to the WPB.

You probably had the idea for a Quarterly and Annual long before you ever heard of me, but if you don't mind, I'll go on taking the credit for a little while, ha, ha. In all seriousness, I hope your Quarterly will be of large format, something on the lines of the old Gernsback Wonder Quarterlies.

And here is another idea, why waste a perfectly good back page on advertising? Why not illustrate your back page as well as your front, in other words have two Covers! I mean this idea could be applied to SS and Wonder, as well as to the Quarterly. Standard Publications would then be the only publishers on the market, bringing out magazines with two covers. Brother, what sensational ideas I give you, but don't panic, I got a million of them.

I take it all back, I take it all back. Some time ago I wrote to you and said Kuttner had not written a story to equal "When the Earth Lived." Well, I just read a back ish of SS, a 1947 ish 'twas, and in it was Hank's "Lands of the Earthquake." Man, what a story! What a super-doooper! It's definitely the best fantasy story I have read in years.

Okay, you guys, I know this is 1950, and I have no business discussing stories which appeared three years ago, but I just thought I would let you know, that's all, if you keep on printing stories like "Lands of the Earthquake," I'll keep

on giving you Super-Colossal Ideas, like those listed above.—
232 James Street, Perth, Western Australia.

Actually the new FSQ and WSA have been in the process of being born since well back in 1948—but suggestions such as yours, Roger did not hurt. However, never monkey with the buzzsaw—we mean the advertising department. They have large platinum teeth. Sorry the format of the new mags isn't of the size you requested but the matter of costs forbade it.

Now that you've finally got hold of HK's LANDS OF THE EARTHQUAKE perhaps you can do likewise with his THE DARK WORLD. That was another lalla-palooza—although it is certainly not far ahead if at all of John MacDonald's corking WINE OF THE DREAMERS in the May issue this year. And Ed Hamilton's big job in this edition is no sneezer or roach rater.

We still find your address a startler—especially since we have known excellent novelist Jimmy Street for many years.

TWO DARK FORMS THAT WERE NEVER THERE by Jack Marsh

Dear Shadow—Creep: The wind clutched at my puny form as I fought against the floods of rain that streamed down at me from the great dark heavens. The street was empty. No man in his right mind would set foot out of his warm sanctuary on such a black, wet evening. But I had to. It couldn't wait for the weather. My mission was of such importance that not even the threat of the terrible Helium bomb could prevent me from going on. Death alone could stop my eager racing through the stormy night.

Ahead was a feeble, yellow light, and I knew that I neared my goal. I fought desperately against the fury of the wind and cursed the piercing rain.

"Oh, no!" I gasped. "Not now!"

Two dark, menacing figures stepped out of an alley between the light and me. They stood silently awaiting me. They COULDN'T stop me! I had to get through!

I charged at them, dodging the stab of a knife. A bit of footwork and I had laid one on the sidewalk. Then, before the other could reach me, I dashed away, racing at full speed for the light.

I made it! Seizing the man by the collar I laid down a shiny bit of metal and demanded the thing that I had to have. He handed it to me.

I sped out of the little store and ducked into an alley. The two dark figures were behind me. Blast them! I reached the next street and ducked into a public phone booth.

Nervously I turned my flashlight on the precious parcel. I looked all through it and it gave me new courage. My job was finished. I stepped out into the slacking rain and made my way home with the March STARTLING STORIES. The two dark forms? They left me. They were my Conscience and my Sanity.—505 Vine St., Jonesboro, Ark.

All right—so we said we'd print one of these once in awhile and this seems to be it. Anybody get the point? We didn't.

JANIE HAD A LITTLE by Mrs. Janie Lamb

Dear Editor: "The Lady Was a Witch," oh, but good! As for the others, I read 'em. If I hadn't liked them I wouldn't have. Ditto for both of your mags. I buy them without having my arm twisted. What more do you want—a bouquet?

As for the purty pitchers, hate to disappoint you Ed, but I'm not gonna criticize them. The truth is I never look at them, never learned to read pictures. I'd still buy the mag if the ills were omitted entirely and only the name on the cover. And I'd buy it if you have a gal with green hair and purple eyes on the cover, just so the inside is good.

What happened to the author of "The Valley of Creation?" Let's have another of his stories, ok?

What a guy is Sneary! He took one of my bad faults and made it famous—bad spelling! Now if some one will do the same for bad punctuation I'll be doubly famous.

I always enjoy the satiric answers to the letters in TEV—keep it up.

Yes, yes I know this is boring, but whatta 'ya expect for three cents, a novel? Wait, I'll go, I'll go, but just you wait'll I learn to write.—Heiskell, Tennessee.

The author of **THE VALLEY OF CREATION**, one Edmund Hamilton yclept, has been appearing regularly as revealed in recent Captain Future novelets in this magazine and **THE CITY AT WORLD'S END**, which occupies pleasingly much of the current edition. And now, Janie, since you have a predilection for Ricardo Sneary, we offer—

CHANGES

by Rick Sneary

Dear Editor: Was looking through the E.V. the other night, and got to thinking of what a change I've seen in it in five years. Not nearly the change from the space-happy Sargent Saturn day, but the over all change. It use to was, that there were only a few pages, and you had to be a Joe Kennedy to get print. Then you had to make pratel about the stories, and dream up cute things that would get your letter printed.

Then there was the days when everyone was sending in drawings of Sargent Saturn, hoping for extry ego-boo . . . The days when everyone had a name, such as the **MAD ROBOT** or **THE HERMIT OF THE GATE** . . . but lackaday, thos are time far gone. Today nearly eveyone, if he comes from England, can get his letter printed in micro-type that ruins your eyes to read.

Yet there is a greater variety of subjects covered. Though of late, the inter-coloum discussions have been missing, there is more liberal treatment of most things. You even verge on mentioning a compeditors name, and you have been most frank about pen-names. While on the other hand, you have been reather touchy about criticism, and fostered some pretty bad potery off on us non-lovers of the muse. . . . In general the letters don't have the punch for me, as when I was starting, but that's my falt for getting old. They must be as good, it's just me.

I see you are still confused over the different L.A. fan groups. Maybe a brif outline of history would help.

A few years ago, F. Laney was very active in the LASFS. He was highly critical of some of the members, and part of the club. As a result he wrote a series of articles about the club, and had his friend C. Burbee, who was then editor of the club fan-mag, publish them. Disregarding the accuracy or not, of the articles, they were very rough on the club.

At the same time the club had voted not to send review copies of it's magazine to one of your lesser compeditors. Editor Burbee send coppies anyway, and as a result was asked to resign as Editor. He and Laney then resigned as members, and formed what is now known as the Insurgent Element, which is more a state of mind, than a club. It's members being former friends of Laney and Burbee, and their main group activity is puting out copies of **WILD HAIR**, and baiting the LASFS.

I might mention that the LASFS has made a great change since the days when Laney was a member. Both in members and in activity. It is now run by a new group. With Mr. Hershey, a chimist who spent the war in a little out of the way spot called Los Alamos, as Director for the past year, the oldtimers agree that "we've never had it this good."

The Outlanders are on the other hand, a group of friends that grew up from the few that use to drop in on me. With the belief that hard-felling are couised in clubs by politics, we have no rules, except that no one may belong unless he lives outside the city limits of L.A. and is agreeable to all present members.

We pick our members, not because we are snobs, but because we are interested in having a good time with fans that enjoy the same thing we do, and that we enjoy being with. While a social club, with all day monthly meetings, we are still extreemly active.

Belonging to other club, Editing in rotation our club magazine **THE OUTLANDER**. (Which my be had from Freddie Hershey, 6445 King Ave., Bell., Calif., for 10c) The **OUTLANDER**, which ever one seems to like but you. We are also sponcering the Third Anunal WESTERCON, to be held in L.A. on June the 18th. Anyone interested in attending, just drope a card to Mrs. Hreshey, and they will be let know the time and location.

Well, guess that is all . . . Except . . . Now that you have

a reprint magazine, how about putting the HoFame story in it. I voted to save the HoF, but now that we have a whole mag devoted to it, I don't think we need them in SS. Huh?—2962 Santa Ana St., South Gate, Calif.

Disregarding your magnificent summation of feudery in Los Angeles fandom, Rick, we can tell you that what you suggest for the Hall of Fame is definitely on the way and may have already arrived by the time this sees print. Those old fan days in the letter columns you sigh for may have been a circus for the contributor—but they were lingering death for editor and general reader alike.

Or should we say alack? So be it.

Whatever the cause, however, it's nice to have your letters around again. How about keeping them coming? They are always good for a laugh and a good idea or six.

TOP OF THE TOP

by Jimmy (not Ginny) Sims

Dear Editor: I have been reading **STARTLING STORIES** since the issue of "Red Sun of Danger." Give Bergey credit for this reader, his cover showed a big robot (Grdg) towering over a girl (Joan) and fighting dragons. I have not missed an issue since.

Your magazine is the best science fiction book published. Your top writer (in my humble opinion) is Edmond Hamilton. Kuttner is good but he is too erratic for me. The best story published was "The Valley of the Flame" by Keith Hammond. I would like very much to have the story that Merritt wrote like Kuttner's **Dark World**. Perhaps the new Quarterly you are putting out would republish it.

The story "The Lady is a Witch" by Daniels was best in this issue but was not up to your usual high standard. "Men Must Die" was second with "Encroachment" next. "The Sign and the Message" and "Appointment in New Utrecht" were fair.

Congratulations on bringing Captain Future back. Don't drop the Rene LaFayette series. I am eagerly anticipating the new Quarterly. Keep up the good work.—504 Fairview Street, Troy, Alabama.

Well, by this time you'll have seen both Quarterly and Annual—we hope you found both up to expectations. The Merritt story in question is **DWELLERS IN THE MIRAGE** and you'll have to look for it in one of our competitors. Unfortunately we do not have the reprint rights. As for LaFayette and his excellent **Conquest of Space Series**, we haven't received any new ones of late—but perhaps the author will regain impetus soon. We hope so.

WHO CARES?

by Ed Cox

Dear Editor: It had been quite some time since I've sent a letter SSwards (or anywhere elsewards) but that urge has come on again and you are the one, you lucky editor you!

Before chewing into the recent issue I might mention that the Jan50SS did completely satisfy my van Vogt appetite as you expected. There were traces of the "old vV" in that one.

Now up to the present. Well, old "Air War," "Army-Navy Flying Stories," etc., Norm Daniels is back! Yes, I used to read all of those aviation zines. I also remember Daniels' previous two SS novels. This tops them though.

Some fans will probably complain to the effect that this story wasn't science-fiction. Who cares? Variety (blondes, brunettes, red-hair . . . oops!) is the spice of anything y'know. This story started out quite well and finished up disappointingly.

I think Daniels just couldn't bear (bare?, bar?) to have Natalie and Bill parted, so changed the plot to have Priscilla turn out to be an ugly old thing etc. I suspect he wrote

himself toward (not into) a hole and had to do some fast plot changing to get away from it.

He couldn't figure out an explanation for Uncle Ezra and and just didn't want to let Bill's pal get Natalie. Bah! At least, that's the way it seems to me. As ya can see, I was rather disappointed that Priscilla didn't turn out to look like the babe on the cover. Said babe being one of Bergey's best in many a month.

"Men Must Die" was a grand s-f story of the old school. Thoroughly enjoyable. Tell me, please, is this Ward Hawkins the same Ward Hawkins of the John and Ward Hawkins who wrote "Devil on His Trail," "Pilebuck" and other good books? I've often wondered.

Ted Powell's little short was a good example of a dead-pan up to the last minute with an O. Henryish ending . . . that fell flat. It seems to me that the natives would be quite annoyed to find that their great ghod and deliverer is but a minor fixture in the newcomers' strange civilization. It would've been better to let them go on believing as they did. I wouldn't want to go up to one of those walking-crocodiles and pop a piece of his ghod into my mouth . . .

Ray Jones' story is another of his many consistently good but not outstanding efforts that have been appearing in your magazines in the last few months. That is just about all I can say about it. I do wish that he'd turn out a few stories up to the par set by some of his older ones in another magazine.

Ha, another Matt Lee (who is zis or is it a real name?) story and like the other, concerning time travel. Unlike the other, this one was worth the space devoted to it.

All in all the fiction in this SS was well rounded out and satisfying. Not up to the par set for 1950 (so far) by the January issue. At least one story from that issue is likely to be in hard covers some day.

I imagine that it will seem like the good old days to the older fans when Standard issues its Quarterly and Annual. Your company is the first to do so (and will probably be the only one). I guess this takes care of my pleas of not-so-long-ago that the old stories be reprinted (in Popular Library books). I await the first Quarterly anxiously.

Here's something else left over from the January issue (I should have written a letter!). I did not debunk the good old days in the "Alien Culture" article! Just the opposite. —4 Spring Street, Lubec, Maine.

Yes, Ward Hawkins is the same Ward Hawkins you're thinking of—who has collaborated so successfully with Brother John these last several years. As for Jones, he has some honeys coming up—notably his **SUNDAY IS 3,000 YEARS AWAY** in the June TWS (already out, of course) and his **THE CYBERNETIC BRAINS** already blurbed earlier in this space for the September SS. Both are honeys. Matt Lee is a pseudonym but we're not telling you whose. You should be able to find out on your own. And you did so debunk the bad old days in your article, whether involuntarily or otherwise. Write again in short order, huh, Ed?

RAY FOR RAY by Jerri Bullock

Dear Ed., ol' pat: A little something that came up a couple of Sundays ago interested me, and I thought maybe some of the "other half" might enjoy hearing about it, also. I was listening to the Radio City Playhouse. The announcer told me it was "Attraction No. 58" and was titled "THE WIND."

Well, I settled back and listened—and I got an earful of the best fantasy yarn I've ever heard on the ether. (THE ETHER VIBRATES excepted and some of those fish-tale "whoppers" in TRS.) When it was over I was impatiently waiting to see where they had obtained the idea for such an excellent story, when Mr. Announcer calmly said:

"THE WIND was written by Ray Bradbury."

Egads! Look what they've been holding out on me all this time! Ray not only writes for THRILLING WONDER, STARTLING, censored, censored and censored—but he writes for radio, too!

Since that Sunday (Nov. 6th) I've learned the story was from his book "DARK CARNIVAL" and that if I would like to hear more of the same I should write to the radio station and tell them so.

Who did I hear this from? Ray Bradbury. I had written concerning the possibility of buying the story and he mentioned that a little plugging would insure more sff on the

air. How about some of you in the reading audience, whether you heard the play or not, dropping NBC a letter? The address:

Radio City Playhouse
c/o Nat'l Broadcasting Co.
New York, N. Y.

Maybe, just maybe, sff is reaching the top rung. By that I mean it is seemingly being treated like an adult now instead of as a moronic author's brain-child. Witness, you Pacific Coast fans, the University of California's radio workshop series. Hallelujah!!!

By the way, dear Editor, "Blade of Grass" by Bradbury (who else?) was veddy, veddy good, too. 22200 Lemon Ave., Hayward, Calif.

All right, children, let's open a Bradbury Lobby. As a matter of fact his work has been frequently tapped for radio and, more recently, television fantasy programs.

OUR GOODNESS! by Alfred Knight, aged 13

Dear Ed: Your March, 1950 issue of S. S. was the worst I have ever read, and I have a large collection of sff mags. "Encroachment" by Raymond F. Jones, was the best story, and it wasn't really good, though it had a neat ending. "The Sign and the Message" was pretty good and had a neat ending. These were the only good stories in the mag. "Appointment in New Utrecht" and "Men Must Die" were awful. "The Lady is a Witch" was not only poorly-written, but it gave a false-impression.

I will quote part of a paragraph from page 46, "Wealth makes people ugly," said Bill. "When you have a certain amount of money—enough for security and gracious living—it is enough." The first part of this is the worst! It simply isn't true. Of course, I might be misinterpreting what Mr. Daniels means by "ugly." It is still not true if he means mentally ugly, which I think he means. It's hard to tell, because his example, Monty Price, is both physically and mentally ugly.

Enough for the first part. The second part was almost as bad. "When you have a certain amount of money—enough for security and gracious living—it is enough." The rest of the story implies that it is bad to have more than "enough." I certainly don't see why. In the first place most millionaires don't hide their huge fortunes away under a floor-board. After all, money doesn't do you any good, it's only the goods you can buy with it.

Most millionaires have most of their money either in goods or invested in a business and I believe most of them are responsible people and do a great deal of "good." I think a world based on the philosophy of "just enough" would be pretty dull, and in the story, Mr. Wilson got \$100,000 for treating Mr. Price. That certainly is rather more than "just enough." I read S. S. for sff—not propaganda!

I also read S. S. for science fiction, not cheap fantasy. The reason I do this is to get, possibly, some scientific ideas with my escapism, or possibly some humor. The first two stories I mentioned were the only ones which had any trace of science or humor. S. S. calls itself an sff mag., and shouldn't stoop to cheap fantasy. The cover, as usual, was awful. Couldn't we have a cover that looks like science? Thanks, anyway, Ed.—Alfred Knight, 6052 Kimbark Ave., Chicago 37, Ill.

All right, aged 13 or not, Alfredo, you asked for it so here goes. In the first place you utterly misinterpreted Mr. Daniels' statement. Lust for money—which was the author's definite implication to folk of 14 years and up, very definitely makes people as ugly as any other unbalanced craving. And surely the matter of enough money for security and "gracious living" is open to the widest of variations. Where some could find both with a comparatively modest income others would need six or seven figures annually to gratify their finest impulses. If you are happy only with original old masters on your walls you're going to need a lot more than the collector of Varga girl calendars.

Now—why this application of the adjective "cheap" to fantasy? After all, not

only is the purist of heavily-technical science fiction no more than a small branch of the vast field of fantasy but it is certainly in no way superior, intellectually, morally or artistically, to non-scientific theorizing. We'll run good fantasy when, as and if we can get it, just as we shall run heavy pseudo science providing we find it good enough. We always have.

HAPPY TALK by Bob Farnham

Dear Ed: Congratulations on another job splendidly done. I'm referring to the March issue. The story, THE LADY IS A WITCH, by Norman Daniels, was the best I've seen in a mighty long time and I've read some excellent stories here lately. The antics of the witch when she grew a little jealous gave me the biggest belly-laugh I've had for a long time. Jes' like a wooman, huh?

The shorts and the Hoff were all way above average, in fact they were excellent. You had a splendid line-up of writers and stories. Even including the cover and despite the fact that TLIW was a rank Fantasy the March issue of Startling Stories is, I feel sure, the tops of the current year altho Startling Stories and Thrilling Wonder Stories have been leaders for much longer than that.

I started reading the March issue when I got home from work at 1 a.m., and was unable to put the mag down till I'd finished THE LADY IS A WITCH, at 4:15! Three hours and 15 minutes of the most interesting and enthralling story of ages! THE LADY IS A WITCH should be placed on the list for a future Hoff'er.

The Ether Vibrates was filled with interesting material altho there were a letter or two as silly as mine usually are. I'd like to correct a statement in Ronald Friedman's letter. The name of World Wide Fantasy has been changed to The Centaurians and we are really coming along! Membership is open to all.

Thanks again for another swell issue, Ed. I'll phone my order today for TWO of the new Quarterly mag, FANTASTIC STORY QUARTERLY. With best wishes from a steady customer. 1139 East 44th Street, Chicago 15, Illinois.

It's nice to know that Abe Lincoln or Phineas T. Barnum or someone was right when he made that still-to-be-definitely-ascribed statement about fooling some of the people et cetera. At least we seem to be *pleasing* one reader all the way through. And no foolin'.

But don't jump the gun on giving the March issue top billing for 1950. May was a powerhouse, as is the current issue, and those yet to come have much promise. It pretty much depends on what type of story by what author hits you the hardest. THE CYBERNETIC BRAINS by Raymond F. Jones, for September, and Jack Vance's first full-length, THE FIVE GOLD BANDS, are going to stir up a lot of fuzz. The first is fine heavy pseudo-science, the second a gorgeous star-spanning space opera such as we have not seen in many a moon.

Better sit tight, Bob, until all the entries are in.

DEAD EDDE! by Calvin Thomas Beck

DEAD EDDE: Don't blame me for the salutation since that's the way my letter started off in the March S.S. If you don't believe me, look it up. Hmmm—didn't know the printer had a grudge against you, did you ol' man!! Well, keep on using that obnoxious super-duper double-blurring elite type for TEV and you'll have to become a "man of distinction" by

switching to Xeno again and having Frog-nose and Wart-eyes helping with the editorial staff's problems again as well.

However, since my last letter, (or, OUR last letter) Cal and Tom Beck have decided to merge, and due to the cost of living, one can live cheaper than two; thus I have taken a solemn vow to avoid aping Les & Es Cole, having enuff trouble fighting Magnus Ridolph, of whom the latter seems, to me at least, to be still "a-fightin' graft in Scleroto City." Feeling in a nasty mood, I only wish that the wicked BEM or gangster of the future gobbles up such corny heroes as Ridolph.

Why not present a new twist to the grind and monotony of presentday STFantasy yarns by having a story wherein the mad tyrant and despot, long plagued by an inferiority complex over the temerity of STF zines of the 20th century because they didn't have trimmed edges, selects a typical hero of the 1000th century and hypnotizes him into building a time-machine with only a box of nails and a screw-driver.

After thus torturing the hero, he sends him back to the 20th century to read all STF zines that were printed then, steal as many and all if possible, so that the tyrant can complete his collection, then have the hero mesmerized into trimming the edges, which as a result not only relieves the tyrant of his complex and inhibitions but helps in making him more tyrannical than ever. All of the latter helps to sharpen the despot's mind meanwhile, making him fashion new tortures and ameliorate old ones as well.

Finally, the tyrant, feeling meaner and ornier than ever, mesmerizes the hero into a state of paralysis and begins to cut the guy into pieces by beating the bejabbers out of him with a pair of boxing gloves made out of razor blades. Getting bored with this form of sports, he eases the anguish and misery out of the hero by thrusting him feet-first into a meat-grinder, as the fiend gloatingly turns the crank and fashions a Heroburger.

The end to this very novel form of an STF tale results with the fiend throwing the remains of our idiotic hero to some roadside diner, of which latter business puts commercial use of stated remains by serving it in forms of divers viands and repasts to unwary customers. (Author's Note: It is to be noted that roadside diners haven't lost that "special" roadside touch, even though this be the 1000th century . . .)

Just say the word dear old Ed and I'll make this into some excellent form of novel to be published anywhere you wish—that is, of course, if you'll remit my usual fee-for-stories of ten cents per word—NO C.O.D.'s please!

Coming now to the stories & contents of the March ish, I can sum up my comments anent the format briefly by stating that it was undoubtedly the best presentation of stories within one issue I've ever seen since I began buying S.S. in 1942. And since I categorize T.W.S. along with S.S. on the same scale, with the only difference in the means of both mags, I can only remember issues of both zines with stories like A GOD NAMED KROO, THE GIANT RUNT, AFTERMATH and THE HOLLOW WORLD, all of which are comparable to an issue as the March S.S., which in my opinion was as excellent as the stories I've named above.

It is true though that the names of such authors (excluding Ray F. Jones) as Norman A. Daniels, Ted Powell, Matt Lee are almost unknown to me or to general STFandom and Ward Hawkins is not what would be exactly termed a household name in the STFantasy fiction line—but names and fame be hanged!! As far as I am concerned it's the story that counts and how much reading pleasure it gives me.

And since I've been very disappointed in the past because I relied on the notoriety of the author's name rather than what type of story he was capable of presenting, I have learned to judge the story and leave the author's name merely to the records as an instrument and label that we may recognize what he has written in the past or will write in the future.

It is with deep regret that I have found the majority of readers and fans of STFantasy fiction buying a book or a magazine because of the name of the author rather than the quality of the book or story. As we connoisseurs have learned, such a policy is wrong, though it HELPS to sell a story commercially speaking. But with most of the contemporary writers of today 'tis better to know the structure and levity of a composition more than anything else.

By that, I do not wish to defile the names of past masters like Homer, Virgil and Shakespeare by including them in such a stipulation—that would be almost criminal. And breaking away from this dissertation, I'd like to interject a notice to all STFantasy enthusiasts to observe that the former and latter names of authors I have mentioned are considered by all of the collectors of literature and scholars, as well, as the REAL fathers and masters of what is known today as science-fantasy literature.

Undoubtedly I may expect a few 'brickbats and bottles to hit my noggin for bringing such an allegedly delicate matter up and many will have the temerity to contest and dispute with me as to what right I may have for appearing so assumingly brash. But right is right and the facts speak for themselves.

Before bringing down the curtain on this epistle, I'd like to offer my praiseworthy congratulations to Virgil Finlay's excellent artwork for THE LADY IS A WITCH. Only gripe I've got is that there weren't too many of such illos for as long a novel as this one. For that matter, there WEREN'T

MANY pics at all in the March S.S. Leave us have more illos pleeze, regardless of the dent in thy company's bank-roll.

Albeit, Finlay did one of the best jobs I can ever recollect he may have done in the past and there shouldn't be any more disputes regarding the argument as to Finlay and Lawrence-Stevens—or Stevens-Lawrence—being tied for first place. Kindly move over Mr. Lawrence or Stevens or whatever your name is. Please take the artist's throne, Mr. Finlay, and long may you hold its regal scepter in your hand.—P.O. Box 1571, Grand Central Station, New York 17, N. Y.

There's just one trouble with your hero-burger idea, Calvin. We fear it would be a little like the story of the restaurant customer who was told to shut up about the mouse in his beer lest all the other customers demand the same. Supposing these heroburgers caught on. It would create considerable of a problem—for even in the stf of the thousandth century heroes will scarcely be as abundant as beef or the synthetic substitutes then in favor.

Resultant cries of privilege against those who actually ate the heroburgers would undoubtedly unseat the tyrant within a very brief time. No—we're afraid this one wouldn't work.

HALF-CASTE BALLOT

by Vernon L. McCain

Dear Editor: The March Startling was mediocre, which puts it below your usual level. However, the letter column was way above average which evens things somewhat. I've been reading your mag (and letter column) for years but as I only recently plunged into fandom I find my appreciation of the latter greatly enhanced.

Along with the majority of your readers, I cast my ballot for moving the Hof out of SS (and into your reprint mag if you choose).

A MacDonald novel sounds fine. Hope it lives up to his short quality.

I'd like to take issue with Ruby Anderson about authors' comments (and the same goes for editors' notes). As long as these are footnotes appended to the story, which everyone knows to be fictional, it's all part of that delicious "just-suppose" atmosphere of fantasy and stf. Many such have been written deliberately in such a way as to make disproof impossible. And there's always about one chance in ten million one of these, someday, will be true but too fantastic to be accepted as fact and too good a story to keep. The best one of this sort which comes to mind is "You'll see a Pink House" by Wilm Carver (I think) which appeared in TWS in 1944.

This sort of thing is miles from what Miss Anderson was objecting to in that other magazine where the entire editorial section was devoted to hoaxing the credulous. As long as you confine your fiction to the story section of the magazine you can make it as believable as you like and I'll eat it up.

I've a couple of gripes about the current issue. The cover was one of Bergey's most decorative but as usual he didn't read the story. With that witch I'm afraid we'd have had quite a different ending. From the ending, I'd judge Norm Daniels hadn't read the story either. Or maybe he let a couple of years drift by after writing the first half before he finished it. At any rate the tale did a complete psychological backflip about two thirds of the way through.

One last complaint. Space opera, though second rate science fiction, can be very relaxing when one is in the correct mood. The consistently best space opera were the Captain Future tales. But that novelet you published last issue wasn't fit to rate the Captain Future title. And no disrespect to Ed Hamilton either. The futuremen need room to flex their muscles. Either bring 'em back in full length novels or not at all, please, Ed.—c/o Western Union, Ellensburg, Wash.

The majority consensus is that Cap Future does very well at 10,000 words—and for once we are in accord with the bulk of the gang. We too enjoyed Carver's YOU'LL SEE A PINK HOUSE, which appeared in the same issue of TWS (Winter, 1945)

with Leinster's DE PROFUNDIS, Fredric Brown's hilarious PI IN THE SKY and the late Arthur K. Barnes' last long job, FOG OVER VENUS. We always thought that issue received a lot less reader credit than it deserved at the time, especially when viewed in retrospect. Those were good stories, as was THEY SCULP by Leslie Northern in the same edition.

As for the switch in the Daniels novel and the HoF future, both topics have already been discussed in this column.

IRATE DISSENTER

by Rex E. Ward

Dear Editor: The cover on the March 1950 issue of STARTLING STORIES was just about the funniest thing I've ever seen. I am pleased that I am far and above all your readers who think they appreciate such things.

As for the novel, THE LADY IS A WITCH, I can't recall offhand when I've seen a worse one. Tell me, do you print such downright awful stories on purpose? I couldn't even laugh at this one.

You will be happy to know that the reprint this time was not too bad, but all the interior illustrations were simply n. g.

For your benefit, I shall explain to you what was meant by Dorothea M. Faulkner when she said she wasn't brilliant because she didn't keep fifty million monkeys. In one of your competitor magazines there was once a story published by that title, and it caused quite a stir though actually it was one of the poorest stories I've read.

It was about a man who wanted to solve a problem, so he set a huge amount of monkeys to work at typewriters in hopes that they would actually stumble onto the answer in their meaningless typing. After awhile it seems to me that he invented a machine which did the work of fifty million monkeys. Now you understand what was meant.

In all fairness I must say that you are doing a wonderful service in bringing back the Cap Future stories. You would do well to publish one every issue, since they are the only worthwhile things you seem to be able to get hold of.

It is a shame that you are going to add another science-fiction magazine to the field. There are already too many—I am sure everyone will agree to that.

In closing I have one suggestion. Why not put both STARTLING STORIES and THRILLING WONDER STORIES on quarterly bases as is the new magazine?—305 East Maple Avenue, El Segundo, California.

We'll throw this one to the wolves for response both fitting and seemly (we hope). Okay, wolves?

However, we *do* know the fifty million monkeys theory, which was, we believe, originally voiced by Aldous Huxley. We did not read the story in question, however. Better shed a few pounds of bile, Rex, before you write your next.

ODDS FISH!

by Morton D. Paley

Dear Editor: "Gad!" I thought, upon seeing Startling's latest cover. "If they make witches like that, I'm gonna go out and get myself bewitched." But fair Priscilla wasn't so fair after all, was she? Alas, that's life.

"The Lady Is a Witch" was swell fantasy. This story leads me to the conclusion that Daniels is either:

- a—an up-and-coming writer,
- b—a returning old-timer or
- c—one of Kuttner's pen names

Which is it?

However, fine as the novel was, it was topped by "Enroachment," the best Jones has done for a long time. This was terrific science-fiction in the true sense of the word. I hope Jones will stick to this type of story and drop Cal Meacham permanently.

"Men Must Die" took third place. Though no classic Hawkins had a well-spun yarn in this piece. I would like to know, however, how the body was kept alive when only the

brain was bathed in artificial blood.

The two shorts were ordinary run-of-the-mill.

Your editorial departments were superb as usual but I think you're a bit too enthusiastic about the books reviewed and somewhat too hard on the fanzines. By the way, you'll be getting my 'zine, "Transgalactic" in about a month.

"Ethergrams" defies definition, as always.

Bergey's cover wasn't so bad, though I'd still like to see Finlay out there. Incidentally, Finlay had some terrific insiders this ish, though the other illios weren't so hot.

All in all, this was a good issue but please don't make it a habit. It's not that I'm a "name" author fiend, but it is reassuring to see Bradbury, Hamilton, Kuttner & Co. on the contents page.

I'm glad to see that you have a MacDonald novel coming up. John D. has written some fine detective novels, but his shorts are hampered by their weak endings. Also keep up Hamilton's Cap Future novelets. Cap may be a relic of a bygone age but it's good space opry and woe to the poor zombie who no longer has the feeling in him to thrill to it. —1455 Townsend Avenue, New York 52, New York.

After the Rexward scourge, this is a relief. And you'll have plenty of "names" in current and coming issues. This one just happened that way. As for Daniels, you may have gathered by now that he is a long-time veteran of stf and other magazine fields with his detective yarns the most consistently prominent. What's "enroachment?" Hope it isn't what it reads like. You'll have to ask Hawkins how he deep-froze that body.

COMPLAINT CORNER by Roy Tackett

Dear Editor: Now see here. For over a year now I have had no complaint about SS or TWS. Since you expanded the magazines the quality of your stories has been consistently good. Until now.

What in the name of the thousand gods of fandom possessed you to print that atrocity in the March issue? I am referring, of course, to "The Lady is a Witch" by Norman Daniels. First, it was not a good story. Second, a yarn such

as "The Lady is a Witch" does not belong in a magazine which advertises "Scientifiction at its best."

When I want to read tales of witchcraft and associated subjects I do not buy STARTLING STORIES. By running such a lead novel you spoiled the entire issue. Scientifiction at its best—indeed!

One more thing. Crack your whip on the proofreaders. RHODOMAGNETIC DIGEST sells for 20c per copy, not 50c as stated in your review.

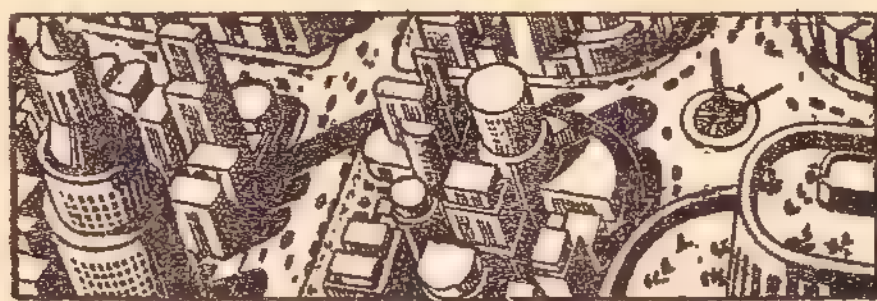
Good luck with the Quarterly.—1991 21st Avenue, San Francisco 16, California.

Well, don't blame us for trying to put the "Digest" in the class-magazine elite. And don't blame us for an occasional fantasy yarn, even though you apparently departmentalize your reading—a shameful practise. More seriously, we hope you find current and forthcoming issues more to your taste.

It's an odd thing about THE LADY IS A WITCH. We knew we were asking for trouble when we ran it but on the whole the story received a far more enthusiastic reception than we had dared hope for. We found it imaginative, good fun all the way and with at least a thread of pseudoscience to hold its broomstick antics connected to Earth. We're delighted most of you enjoyed it, sorry a few did not. We don't run fantasy leads often but once in awhile . . .

On the whole an intriguing group of letters—for which, thanks, all. Please keep them rolling in. We'll be ready and waiting. Until next month in TWS then, *adieu*.

—THE EDITOR.

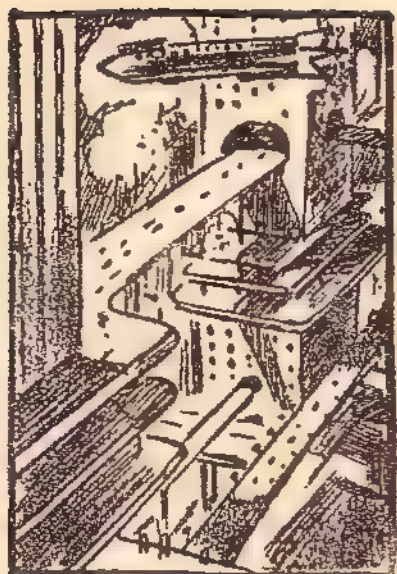


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REVIEW OF THE CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION FAN PUBLICATIONS



DEREK PICKLES, the British fanatic, in collaboration with Philip J. Rasch, 715 West 112th Street, Los Angeles 44, California, writes in to inform us of a new STF FAN CLIPPING SERVICE, with which he plans to keep U. S. fans informed about up-to-date activities in England, running from the occult to the latest reviews of books, films and plays that might be of interest to lovers of stf. Write Mr. Rasch if interested or Mr. Pickles, 41 Compton Street, Dudley Hill, Bradford, Yorkshire, England. It sounds like good stuff to us.

And Will Sykora has sent us a note announcing the holding of the Fourth Science Fiction Conclave of the Queens Science Fiction League, P. O. Box No. 4, Steinway Station, Long Island City 3, New York—the Conclave to be held on May 28th of this year at the Malin Studios, West 42nd Street, in Manhattan. As usual, a raft of stf celebrities and fans will be on hand, along with some such cinema curiosa as “Nosferatu—the Vampire” or “The Lost World.” This also sounds good.

An Intriguing Fanzine

Most intriguing and interesting of the new fanzines to be sent us for this column is THE NEKROMANTIKON, subtitled “Amateur Magazine of Weird and Fantasy” and both published and edited by Manly Banister, 1905 Spruce Street, Kansas City 1, Missouri. NEKKY sells for two bits per issue, will appear quarterly if all goes well and offers a year's subscription for the inevitable one buck.

This is a near-professional job, consisting of 52 pages apart from the covers with artwork all in linoleum block by Banister and on the whole superior to the written copy. It contains four poems dealing with the macabre, by M. Houston, Rory Faulkner, Emili A. and Val Seanne, of which on the whole we liked Emili A's the best—though as all were in a-b-c-b pentameter there was little to choose among them.

There are, for features, a flying saucer thing, an essay on fear by the editor-publisher (on the whole he's for it) and a brief dip into the genealogy of the Pharaohs by Eva Firestone. Mr. Banister has a werewolf story, Edward W. Ludwig deals with a couple of errant demons who find modern city life too hard to take and M. Houston, George Hart and Gregg Powers play editorial xylophones upon adjectives purported to raise hackles on human vertebrae.

If you've gotta be gruesome you can't best NEKKY.

We take it all back—you *can* top NEKKY with the most recent mailing of the Spectator Amateur Press Society, forwarded us (we suspect out of sheer unbridled malice) by Interim SAPS Editor Arthur H. Rapp, 2120 Bay Street, Saginaw, Michigan. We're going to list them without comment and make a few cracks when it's all over, to wit and notwithstanding as follows—

ARCTURUS—Rick Sneary, 2962 Santa Ana Street, South Gate, California.
COSMOS—Bill Venable, 32 Park Place, R.D. No. 4, Pittsburgh 9, Pennsylvania.
DOODAD—Al Toth, 1110 Gillespie Avenue, Portage, Pennsylvania.
GAAA—Sid Gluck, 1047 Louisa Street, Elizabeth, New Jersey.
GLOP—Bill Calabrese, 52 Pacific Street, Stamford, Connecticut.
GRAFEN—Charles Henderson, 2145 East 13th South, Salt Lake City 5, Utah.
HURKLE—Redd Boggs, 2215 Benjamin Street N.E., Minneapolis 18, Minnesota.
MOCK—Arnim Seielstad, 1500 Fairholme, Grosse Pointe 30, Michigan.
NAMLEPS—Henry M. Spelman III, P.O. Box AG, Vero Beach, Florida.
OUTSIDERS—Bill Ballard, Blanchard, North Dakota.
PMCRWF—Walter A. Coslet, P.O. Box No. 6, Helena, Montana.
STUPEFYING STORIES—Ray Nelson, 433 East Chapin Street, Cadillac, Michigan.
TALES FROM UNCLE REMUS—no credit.
TIMEWARP—Arthur H. Rapp, 2120 Bay Street, Saginaw, Michigan.

Of this horrendous list we enjoyed the very phony contents page in Ray Nelson's STUPEFYING STORIES the most. In general, however—*brother!*

The A-Listing

With which, leave us at the current A-Listing, which is rather long, as is its B-

supplement. As always, in alphabetical order, we tackle first—

THE CRICKET, 201 Veterans Village, Canton, New York. Editors, Betsy & Ed Curtis. Published spasmodically. No price listed.

A well-printed and decorated little 'zine which appears all too infrequently. Its contents are devoted to comment and criticism of stf interest, most of it on an adult, amusing and intelligent level.

ETAOIN SHRDLU, 40 West 77th Street, Apt 2F, New York 24, New York. Editor, Stephen Taller. Published bi-monthly. 5c per copy.

An ambitious effort put out by Bronx High School students, which features a good interview with anthologist Groff Conklin and a somewhat zany piece by former TWS and SS contributor Alfred Bestor. There are also reviews and other features, in one of which Morton Sternheim tells you just how to write for the pulps. Hope this gang can keep it up for awhile.

FANTASY COMMENTATOR, 7 East 235th Street, New York 66, New York. Editor, A. Langley Searles. Published quarterly. 25c per copy, 5 issues \$1.00.

Still in there pitching in its intelligent, undecorative and thoughtful way, including as always fine book reviews and the Moskowitz history of fandom, otherwise The Immortal Storm. Moskowitz also gives the current prozine field a thorough and generally accurate overhauling in the lead article, The Face of Fantasy: 1950. A good issue of a good 'zine.

FANTASY-TIMES, 137-03 32nd Avenue, Flushing, New York. Editor, James V. Taurasi. Published twice monthly. 10c per copy.

Probably the most completely equipped and best presented newszine of all fan history—FT continues to roll out on schedule with more and more information as to what is going on in the amateur and professional stf fields. Mr. Taurasi and his loyal helpers deserve a vote of thanks from just about everybody.

THE GORGON, 600 Columbia Road, Colorado Springs, Colorado. Editor, Stanley Mullen. Published irregularly. 20c per copy, 7 issues \$1.00.

This topflight amateur magazine has been a stranger for too long and we can only give it a welcome back Hosannah. Especially as it is up to, perhaps a bit above, its already high previous standard. Dr. Keller has a very amusing story about an innocent Milquetoast who becomes inextricably tangled in pornography. Larry O'Neill has a riotous brief on the dire fate of Earth's final bachelor when the women locate his tree-home and Neil R. Jones, Virgil Utter, Phil Rasch, Erik Margrave, Mahlon Blaine and John Gockroft, among others contribute a variety of specialties in illustration, prose and poetry. Very fine and some of it very funny—intentionally so.

THE JOURNAL OF SPACE FLIGHT, 10630 South St. Louis Avenue, Chicago 43, Illinois. Editor, Wayne Proell. Published monthly. 25c per issue, \$2.25 per annum.

The Chicago Rocket Club standby just keeps on rolling along. In the February issue Will Chilcote goes into the ticklish problems of Space Law. Michael Conley introduces a sort of primer of astrogation and there are features by Edmund Winkler and Norman Bowman. A near-must for would-be off-the-Earth zoomers.

OPERATION FANTAST, 13 G.P. R.P.C., B.A.O.R. 23. c/o G.P.O., England. Editor, Captain K. F. Slater. Published quarterly. 15c per copy, 6 issues 75c.

A smart edition of Ken Slater's English 'zine, if a bit thin in contents. Sandy Laurence sends his hero to hell for a visit in the opening story. E. J. Carnell handles book reviews and Captain Slater tees off on earthquake control, among other features. We hope it gets thicker soon.

ORB, 811 9th Street, Greeley, Colorado. Editor, Bob Johnson. Published bi-monthly. 15c per copy, 75c per annum.

Interesting reversal of the current pocketzine trend is this

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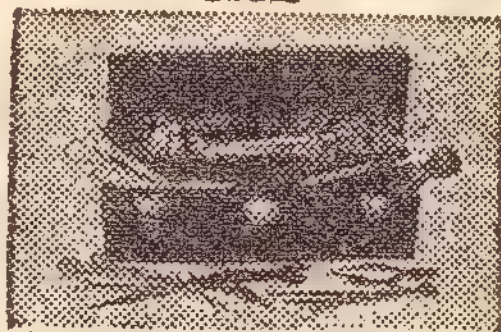
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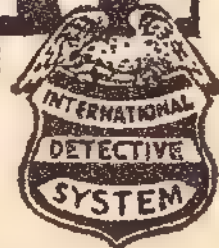
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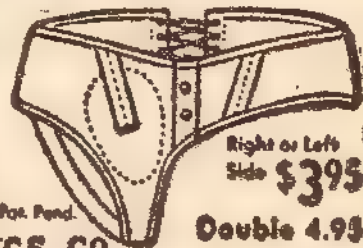
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outsized job "with an eye on fandom." It goes in heavily for short takes despite its big pages, including a Fantivities Kriss-Kross, also poetry, letters, etc. Worth a trial up here in the rarefied air of the A-list.

THE OUTLANDER, 6335 King Avenue, Bell, California (Sec. Freddie Hershey's address). Editor, Stan Woolston. Published irregularly. 10c per copy.

A good solid job by an active fangroup with Professor Ricardo Sneary's Care and Feeding of Young Fans good for a number of chuckles. Con Pederson has a macabre bit of verse, Freddie Hershey liniments some post-conference aches away in Be Glad Your Man's a Fan and Len Moffatt resurrects Ben Franklin for a cask of old Madeira only to have him fall prey to a fangroup. Other features as well help make this good fanentertainment.

PEON, 645-B Gibbs Avenue, Alameda, California. Editor, Charles Lee Riddle, PNI, USN. Published 8 times per annum. 10c per copy, 6 issues 50c.

Dr. Keller's scholarly lament over the evanescence of the essay and the leisure that made it possible features the issue at hand—and Ray Nelson comes up with a strangely effective weirdy about a fatal love affair with a bird-woman. On the whole, we liked.

PLENUM, 2113 North Franklin Street, Philadelphia 22, Pennsylvania. Editor, Milton A. Rothman. Published bi-monthly. No price listed.

The scholarly Mr. Rothman takes over the entire issue with an exhaustive thesis on the proper conduction of science fiction fan conventions—and we hope enough fans read it for his good sense to have its deserved effect.

SCIENCE-FANTASY REVIEW, 115 Wanstead Park Road, Ilford, Essex, England. Editor, Walter Gillings. Published quarterly. 25c per copy, \$1.00 per annum.

Editor Gillings stars in his own magazine this issue with a fine study of inventions that for one reason or another failed to come off. Book reviews and fanactivity, to say nothing of proactivity, are right up to snuff, Jack Williamson is thoroughly profiled by Thomas Sheridan and Erik Fennel ups and practically defies Utopia to turn up and anyone to enjoy it if it did. Best of the foreign fanzines as always—one of the best anywhere.

SHIVERS, 230 Prince Street, Bridgeport 8, Connecticut. Editor, H. S. Weatherby, HMI, USN. Published quarterly. 10c per copy.

Editor Weatherby unleashes a good bit of macabre irony in Trouble with Relatives, Messrs. King and Hudson tee off on ghost analysis and Ed Ludwig slips right back into the macabre with THE POTS. On the whole not a strong issue.

SOUTHERN FANDOM, 2703 Camp Street, New Orleans 13, Louisiana. Editor, Harry B. Moore. Published irregularly. 10c per copy.

Another so-so job with fair efforts by Editor Moore, Squire Pong and Lionel Inman. You'll hear more about this one in the next FRYING PAN (TWS, Aug. '50).

SPACEWARP, 2120 Bay Street, Saginaw, Michigan. Editor, Arthur H. Rapp. Published monthly. 15c per copy, 2 issues 25c etc.

Ed Cox correctly proves that science can never catch up with stf, Warren Baldwin shudders at the H-bomb, T. E. Watkins, Toby Duane, Genevieve Stephens and Fred Remus, among others, strut their varied stuff in prose and poetry. This comes out a good issue all around.

The B-List

And now for that Madam Tussaud's chamber of waxwork horrors known more generally as the B-list. *En avant!*

AD-O-ZINE, 2085 East Atlantic Street, Philadelphia 34, Pennsylvania. Editor, W. C. Butts. Published irregularly. No price listed. Neophyte among the swapzines. Not much to it in format or contents as yet. May grow—we hope.

ASTRA'S TOWER, 309A 9th Street, Levelland, Texas. Editor, Marion Zimmer Bradley. Published irregularly. No price listed. Mrs. Bradley does a promising job of carrying on alone since the death of her co-editor—but it is not quite up to A-listing

this issue. Perhaps next time it will be back where her talent should have little trouble restoring it.

DAWN, 203 Wampum Avenue, Louisville 9, Kentucky. Editor, Russell K. Watkins. Published bi-monthly. 10c per copy. This long letterzine improves neither in format nor with age. New editors may snap things up.

THE DETROIT STAFAN, 5037 Maplewood Avenue, Detroit 4, Michigan. Published irregularly. No price listed. Local stuff for Detroit fandom—and okay as far as it goes.

EUSIFANSO, P.O. Box No. 161, Eugene, Oregon. Editor, D. R. Fraser. Published irregularly. No price listed. Eugene eugenics experts cut loose—a bit thin for our taste.

FAN-FARE, 119 Ward Road, North Tonawanda, New York. Editor, W. Paul Ganley. Published bi-monthly. 10c per copy. Neophyte with promise—but a bit Lemurian both in contents and presentation. Has that written-under-water look.

THE FANTASY ATTIC, P.O. Box No. 6, Helena, Montana. Editor, Walter A. Coslet. Published irregularly. Free on request. Beginnings of what may soon be fandom's top swap sheet.

INCUBUS, 806 Oak Street, Runnemede, New Jersey. Editor, Dave Hammond. Published irregularly. No price listed. Editor Hammond lists a staff at least twice as big as that we use to put out SS, TWS, FRQ and WSA, to say nothing of another group. Yet contents are both skimpy and sloppy.

NEWS BULLETIN, 3200 Harvard Avenue North, Seattle 7, Washington. Editor, G. M. Carr. Published irregularly. No price listed. We don't get it but it evidently means something to those who troubled to put it out.

NEBULA, 407 Philip Avenue, Norfolk, Nebraska. Editor, Warren Baldwin. Published monthly. 10c per copy, \$1.00 per annum. A fairly new one, featuring G. K. Stephens, Bill James and one yclept Jim Craig. Might go places.

ONE FAN'S OPINION, P. O. Box No. 1199, Grand Central Station, New York 17, New York. Editor Lee D. Quinn. Editor Quinn decides he's had enough and quits. Too bad—we were beginning to like his one unsmall voice.

PRO-CARD, 760 Montgomery Street, Brooklyn 13, New York. Editor, Bob Silverberg. Published bi-weekly. 4 copies 10c. First cardzine to show up in many a moon.

SCIENCE AND SCIENCE-FANTASY REVIEW, P. O. Box No. 877, Grand Central Station, New York 17, New York. Editor, Calvin Thomas Beck. Published monthly. 15c per copy. Mr. Beck has his say so fully in this one no one else can get in. But not bad.

SLANT, 170 Upper Newtonards Road, Belfast, Northern Ireland. Editor, Walter A. Willis. Published irregularly. 4 copies for one prozine. Banshees and Forrest J. Ackerman on the Northern Ireland moors, heaths, commons or what have you. Fair enough if you like that stuff.

SPACESHIP, 760 Montgomery Street, Brooklyn 13, New York. Editors, Bob Silverberg & Saul Diskin. Published quarterly. 5c per copy, 8 issues 35c. These kids are improving but they have a long way to go. Stay with it!

STF TRADER, 1028 Third Avenue South, Moorhead, Minnesota. Editor, K. Martin Carlson. Published bi-monthly. No price listed. Current king of the swapzines.

UTOPIAN, 111 South 15th Street, Corsicana, Texas. Editor, R. J. Banks, Jr. Published irregularly. 10c per copy, 3 issues 25c. Kind of a wee one to come out of the lone Star State.

WASHINGTON NEWS LETTER, 6604 Allegheny Avenue, Takoma Park, Maryland. Editor, Chick Derry. Published semi-monthly. No price listed. Local stuff for the increasingly live WSFS. Chatty for its length.

And that, gentle people, just about does it for now. Please keep them coming in for perusal and comment. We like to know what you're up to—any of you who are sufficiently interested in stf to give time, thought and labor to the publishing of fanzines. We only hope, with the resources at our command, that we do half as well professionally.

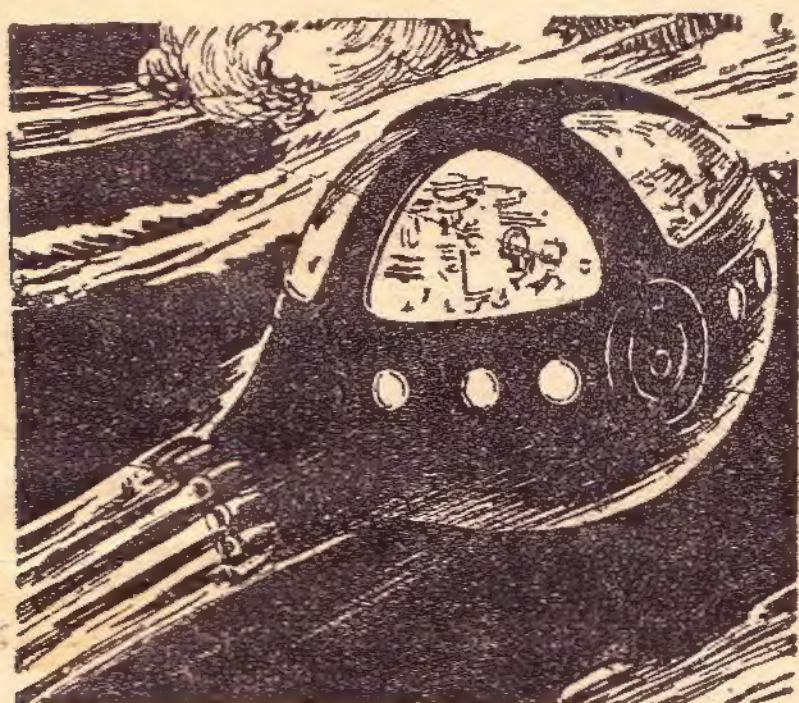
—THE EDITOR

SCIENCE FICTION BOOKSHELF

REVIEWS OF NEW BOOKS

NEEDLE by Hal Clement, Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York (\$2.50).

Something that is, to us at any rate, entirely new in alien invaders of Earth arrives on a small Pacific island devoted to biological experiment in this simply constructed and very well-written story by one



of the better-known active sciencefictionists of the past few years.

In this instance there are two invaders—one of them a wanted "criminal" in flight from his distant star, the other the detective or "hunter" sent to track him down and bring him back for painless reconversion to social adjustment.

Earth's gravity ruins the hunter's assignment by wrecking both of their spaceships in the double crackup. From then on he is confined to this planet for life—which must normally endure for several human centuries—and can only track down his quarry and kill him.

This is a singularly difficult task, for both aliens are tiny symbiotes—accustomed to living within the bodies of other creatures. The hunter, finding his own "host" killed in the smash under water, first takes over a shark, which is landlocked and dies on the island, then the body of a boy who discovers the dead shark.

This lad is promptly shipped back to school in the States and for awhile the

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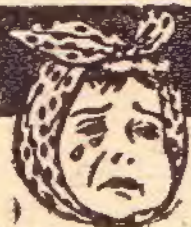
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SIDELINE IN TIME by Murray Leinster, Shasta Publishers, Chicago, Illinois (\$3.00).

The expert and prolific Mr. Leinster here presents, apart from an introduction, a half dozen of his "scientific adventures," including the title story, which suggests some of the disturbing things that could happen to familiar places and eras should time take leave of its senses in a galactic convulsion which for a while threatens to eliminate time and therefore life entirely.

The second story, *Proxima Centauri*, deals with mutually unpleasant contact between human star pioneers and vegetable beings who consider human flesh slightly more precious than diamonds and slightly more edible than filet mignon. Fortunately or otherwise the Centaurians come out second best in the resultant fracas.

A *Logic Named Joe* involves the trials of a cybernetic robot expert with a robot who develops a dangerously tactless mind of its own, thereby all but wrecking the world. *De Profundis*, first printed in TWS, Winter, 1945, is a brilliant study of men through the thoughts and emotions of a submarine monster—*The Fourth-Dimensional Demonstrator* tells of amour, the police and a machine which puts things where they

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shouldn't be—*The Power* purports to be a superior alien trapped on Earth by accident.

These stories, without exception, are good Leinster. If you like his work you will like them. If by any chance you do not as yet know his work, this volume offers a first-rate opportunity for you to get acquainted with it.

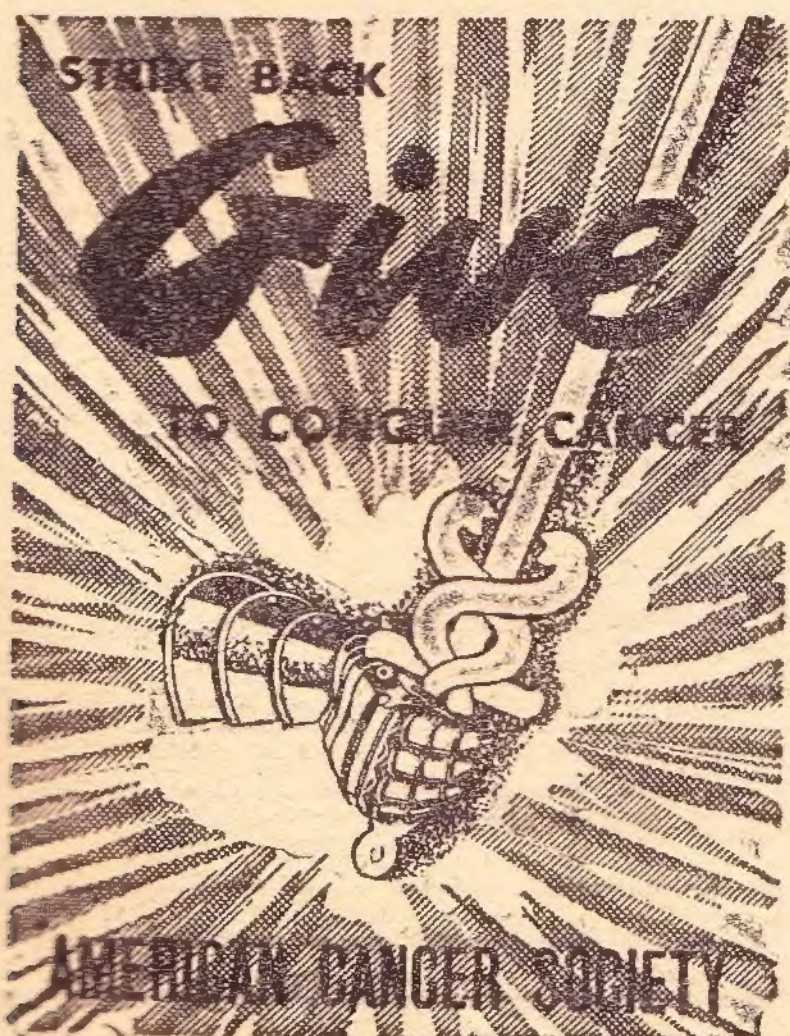
NOMAD by George O. Smith, Prime Press, Philadelphia (\$3.00).

If you like your space opera, this is your dish. Virtually uncomplicated by anything but Mr. Smith's wonderously ingenious and never-failing gadgetry, galaxies are spanned and fought over in never-ending action in NOMAD, with a minimum of regard for motive, mood, characterization or the niceties of literary style.

Briefly this book is the saga of Guy Maynard, young subaltern of the Terran Space Patrol, who is snatched and tortured in mid-space by Martians, revived by a scout from Ertene, a wandering invisible planet passing through the Solar System on its endless jaunt in space and indoctrinated with superior Ertinian gadgetry before being sent back to Terra.

Thus abetted he quickly rises to Space Marshalship, discovers and ravages a tenth planet in a truly horrendous war, is stripped of honors, finds refuge on Ertene, is forced to flee same and, in a couple of last-gasp switches becomes benevolent Emperor of the Solar System.

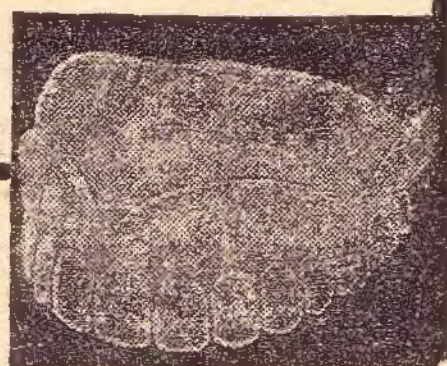
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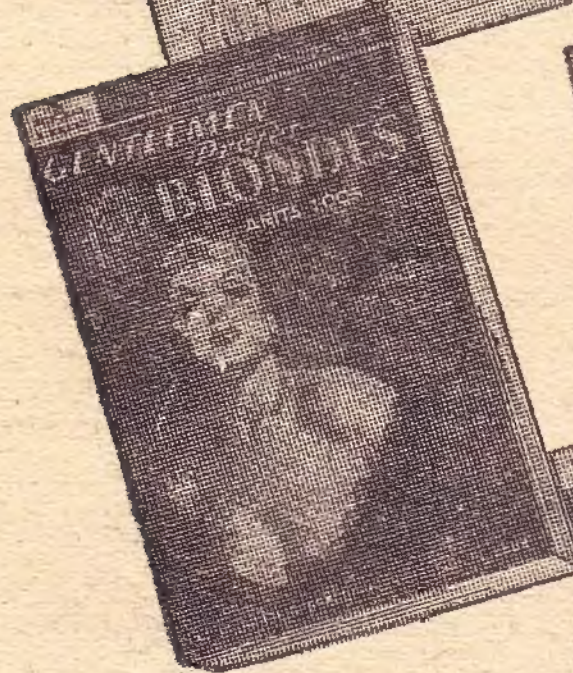
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